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MISS FINGAL

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BY

MRS. W. K. CLIFFORD

Clifford, Lucy (Lanie)

"For of the soul the body form doth take,
For soul is form and doth the body make."

—SPENSER.

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PART I.

I.

IN 1905, when she was not yet twenty-one, Miss Fingal went to live alone at Battersea, high up in a little flat overlooking the park: she stayed there eight years. The flat, like those adjoining it, contained a sitting-room with a balcony, a bedroom, a bathroom, and a kitchen. That was all. The tenants were not supposed to be rich enough to keep a servant; Mrs. Bailey, fifty and well-fed looking, with a grey shawl pinned across her shoulders and a red flower in her black bonnet, came every morning to do the necessary cleaning and to cook the modest meal that Miss Fingal called her luncheon; dinner was a rite often forgotten and never worth considering. She had no belongings except an elderly uncle John, a bachelor, who lived in Bedford Square; but she seldom went to his house. Once a year, at Christmas, he sent her a ten-pound note (possibly he thought she might have some difficulty in cashing a cheque) in a registered envelope, with "Best wishes" written on half a sheet of note-paper. Once a year, in June usually, he sent her his Royal Academy catalogue—she had asked him for it one day, explaining that it would save her a shilling. At other times he appeared to forget her existence; but this was not surprising, for she was a sort of human excrescence that had been almost rubbed out

on the face of time. No one remembered her or knew her or cared about her, or did anything for her except on the ten-pound note day at Christmas, and the Academy catalogue day at midsummer. Even Mrs. Bailey took little heed of her, though she was paid five shillings a week for her services, and now and then given a pair of worn-out shoes or an old garment, which she carried away, obviously thinking, "They're not good for much," and with a manner that suggested she would forget how she had come by them before she reached home.

Miss Fingal had been eight years in the flat and was nearly twenty-nine—she might have been any age, older or younger. She was slim and very calm of manner. She had a quantity of brown hair coiled close to her head, grey eyes, soft and kind, but vague and dark-lashed, which gave them a curious air of safeguarding her thoughts and making her seem a little remote. Her low even voice, pitched in a sweet and usually treble key, added to the effect of remoteness; it seemed to be all that was left of some insistent sound that had struggled through the by-gones and, fatigued with long effort, to have little strength left for its owner's use.

Eight years in the flat. It seemed as if she might be there eight more, and eight more again, for all that was likely to happen. But she faced the prospect, if she thought about it at all, without alarm: time was a monotonous stream, and she went on with it patiently, expecting nothing.

And just as she looked forward to nothing, so, too, there was no background to her life; she had no memories over which she cared to linger. Her mother had died when she was a child; her father, a soldier on half pay, had sent her to a dull school at Worthing till she was grown up. Then she lived in lodgings for two years with him, but they had not been intimate; he was a morose man who resented not being better off, and spent most of his time at his club. When he died, she thought that death demanded tears and a period of mourning: she paid its toll. A month later she settled down in the little flat at Battersea.

She gathered in silence and shyness to her heart, and the lack of keen interests told upon her. This, too, had its effect, and it was as if a mental haze drew softly round her. Now and then she made half-hearted attempts to shake it off, to overtake the world behind which she was consciously lagging, to understand it better, to grasp its interests; she even thought about its pleasures, but after one or two futile attempts to gain new experiences she drew back gratefully into the restful uneventful days that were her portion. She belonged to the unfortunate lower rank of the upper class, and its lingering prejudices prevented her from trying to augment her income—which was small enough to escape taxation—by any of the methods that have occurred to women in recent days, so that she had none of the excitements and adventures of those who earn. Sometimes she had an idea that she ought to be useful in charitable work; but she was afraid to thrust herself among the people concerned in it, though she did many acts of kindness in a foolish inconsequent manner—such as giving sixpences to beggars who were obviously impostors, or sending anonymous postal orders of a shilling to cases that seemed deserving. One winter she had been intermittently grieved but interested while Mrs. Bailey's daughter was dying of consumption: she went to her door every week, carrying little gifts that she thought might be nourishing. When the end came she sent a wreath—a very small one, the large ones were too expensive—and she gave the charing mother a black dress that was only half worn out.

Life hung on her hands a good deal for a week or two after Lily Bailey died. There was a dearth of things to do in the long quiet days; she had no piano, the hire of one was more than she could afford, besides, she had never played well. She disliked needlework. She read a few novels borrowed from a near-by circulating library; they were seldom new and she chose them for their quantity, small print and plenty of it; then a volume lasted a whole week, for she was never sufficiently eager to scurry through or to look at the end. Outside amusements were unknown to her; cheap places repelled her by

the crowds attracted to them, and from the more expensive ones she was cut off by the usual reason. Every June, late in the month, she took herself to the Academy with uncle John's catalogue; once or twice during the winter she went to an afternoon concert—at the Albert Hall usually, for there were shilling places in the top gallery and she could sit with a sense of being peacefully hidden.

In the daylight months, at the after-tea time, she would often stand on the balcony with her head raised and her back against the brick wall of the building, so that her gaze, escaping the roadway beneath, was filled with the green distances of the park beyond. She liked to watch the groups of children, the couples walking arm in arm or resting on the seats, the solitary figure growing smaller and indistinct in the farther background, that seemed to have some definite goal of a sort that was never hers, or to imagine the little boats on the lake hidden from her view on the left, or to listen to the band that was so far off she only heard it faintly. She never entered the park herself, she lacked courage; it was strange that it should be so, seeing that its gates were only across the way. Sometimes when she had left the block of which her flat was a part she hesitated, but her feet seemed to be reluctant, and mentally she shook her head; she did not belong to the green spaces of life, to the pleasures and happy wanderings in the open, so she turned and went her way towards the ugly road with the shops or across the bridge to Chelsea. She liked best of all the old houses of Cheyne Walk: they put her into an atmosphere in which she was recognised and comforted; in some strange way they made her feel young, and provoked a little wondering smile from her when she looked up at them, as if she felt that the secret of her future was in their keeping though she had no expectancy from it. But all this was vague and dreamlike as Miss Fingal's life was, though gradually there came to her a sense of waiting, of which she was hardly aware till the day came when everything was changed.

II.

ONE morning there was a letter. She fetched it hurriedly, it was a pleasant surprise, for no one ever wrote to her except uncle John. This was evidently not from him. The envelope was larger than he used, the handwriting different, and her two first names, Aline Mary, were set out. She had almost forgotten them; no one called her by them or knew them except uncle John, who had seemed to avoid uttering them. He generally greeted her with "Oh, well, how do you do?" and addressed his letters simply to Miss Fingal. The two notes of thanks she wrote him in the year and the dividend receipts for her modest income had been sufficiently signed with initials: to the few people who were aware of her existence at Battersea she was just Miss Fingal, and the Aline Mary an unknown quantity. She stood staring at it now. There was a black seal with the initials "B. G. & G." A perplexed curiosity took hold of her, a little superstitious spasm that was arrested by the vehemence in the kettle over the spirit-lamp, for when the postman rattled her letter-box she had been about to make some tea for her frugal breakfast. "I hope it isn't a death," she said to herself in her rather foolish way. She poured the boiling water into the pot and protected it by a dinner napkin placed over the lid and spout; then she allowed herself to open the envelope, leaving the seal intact, feeling as she pulled out the thick sheet of note-paper that something had happened, or was going to happen, that would fill out her day. She read the short letter twice and took it in slowly.

A firm of solicitors—Bendish, Grant, & Gregory—

informed her with much regret that their esteemed client, Mr. John Fingal, had died the day before, and that, as she was the only relation mentioned in his will, they would be glad if she could make it convenient to call that morning in Bedford Square. She was startled, for she had not been to uncle John's house a dozen times in her life, and never for more than half an hour. He had made her clearly understand that, though he recognised the relationship between them, he had occupations that satisfied him and visitors were not desired. To go now, when he would not be there to look up at her from the revolving chair by the writing-table as she entered, or down on her by the doorway as she departed—she remembered still with a little shiver his cold critical eyes and well-brushed hair—seemed like taking advantage of the fact with which she had just been made acquainted. Yet, though she was unaware of it, somewhere hidden away in her there was a sporting instinct that made her want to see what would come of it.

The meaning of the words signifying that she had an interest in the will did not agitate or even surprise her. It probably meant that he had left her some little compensation for the loss of the yearly ten pounds; it would show that he was very thoughtful, she told herself; but to speculate on his having done more than this did not occur to her. She tried to be sorry for him, and only succeeded in being grave and pitching her surprise in a minor key; but it was curious that suddenly she should feel lonely. She had been lonely before, but his death made her realise it. There would be no more ten-pound note days with "Best wishes" in the winter, or Royal Academy catalogue days in the summer. They had made a break in her life. She had looked forward to them, and back at them . . . the room felt very still.

She heard Mrs. Bailey let herself in. It was a relief, and showed that yesterday reached into to-day and that other things had not stopped, though uncle John had died. It was so strange that he should be dead. She tried to make the fact vivid to herself, for as yet it was only a statement in a letter. She listened. Mrs. Bailey went into the kitchen; she was taking off the little shawl

thrown over her shoulders and the black bonnet with the red flower in it.

She opened the sitting-room door.

"Is there anything I can do for you, miss?"

"No, thank you," Miss Fingal answered in a grateful tone, just as usual. Then, feeling that the event must be put into spoken words, she added, "but I've had a letter"—Mrs. Bailey advanced a step—"my uncle is dead."

"Well now! It must have been sudden or he would have told you?"

"Oh yes, it was sudden, I suppose. I'm very sorry for him. I never thought of his doing that."

"We've all got to come to it, high and low, rich and poor." Mrs. Bailey waited a moment: "I hope he's thought of you, miss?"

Miss Fingal slowly poured out a cup of tea. Mrs. Bailey waited another moment, then put a direct question in a tone that necessitated a clear answer—"I hope he has done well by you, miss?"

"I don't know what he has done yet."

"Of course you wasn't with him much. But I've known cases where it didn't make any difference."

"I don't know what he has done," Miss Fingal repeated, feeling a little helpless under Mrs. Bailey's cross-examination, "but the lawyers have asked me to go to the house because I am the only relation mentioned in the will." It was said without curiosity or exultation.

But Mrs. Bailey was elated. "Well, I never!" she exclaimed; "depend upon it you'll be well off for the rest of your days. I said to my poor Lily once, 'I should never be surprised if something good didn't come to Miss Fingal. You see, it's easy to tell she's a lady'; and you never know when gentlefolks will come by their own, no matter how careful they have to be beforehand, for they generally have well-off relations somewhere who may die and, of course, can't take what they have with them."

"Oh no, they can't do that."

"I shouldn't wonder if you have come into a fortune,

and will have to leave us. I feel sure you'd be kind to those about you and those you've known"—Mrs. Bailey looked round in a comprehensive way that made Miss Fingal feel she had been a part of a whole, a something she had not realised but would be sorry to leave. "When will you know more, miss? Are you going to the house to-day?"

"Oh yes, the letter asks me to go this morning."

"About twelve, I should say? That's the time when gentlemen are usually ready for business—or a little earlier. I think if I were you, miss, I'd make it half-past eleven, then they won't be hurried for thinking of their lunch."

The advised one meekly assented.

"What will you wear now? I don't think you've anything black by you?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter." Miss Fingal shook her head at the tiresomeness of the question.

"It would look better anyway to go in something dark. Your navy blue would do very well for before the funeral. I dare say you can get your proper mourning made in time for that." Mrs. Bailey's animation increased with each fresh idea that occurred to her. "And if you should want to let the flat, miss, why, a young couple spoke to me only two days ago and asked me if I knew of a top one likely to be had."

III.

THE blinds of the house in Bedford Square—they were holland, of a dingy yellow tint—were drawn down, and seemed to cling close to the windows. She was sensible of the gloom within before she entered, and dismayed at the loudness of the knock she could not control. Stimson, the sedate and middle-aged man-servant, answered it. For a moment he looked at the slim figure and pale face with hesitation, then quickly opened the door a little wider and stood aside; the deferential set-back of his shoulders showed that he recognised the importance of the arrival.

“Oh yes, Miss Fingal,” he said in a depressed voice, “Mr. Bendish and Sir James are waiting for you in the library.”

She crossed the threshold with a little sigh of relief at having got thus far on her adventure and followed him to the only room she had ever entered. It was lined with heavy books of which the bindings suggested that they had not been used for years; in front of the shelves facing the fireplace, a glazed map, yellow with age, stretched down from its roller; near the window was a large writing-table with a heavy bronze inkstand, and beside it the chair from which uncle John had looked up at her. A tall thin man rose from it now, elderly and grey, with keen eyes and beetling brows. He pushed aside some papers he had been examining and went towards her.

“Ah, Miss Fingal? I was rather afraid, as you had not telegraphed, that you might be away.” He held her hand for a moment and mentally described her as “rather plain, but not without a soft dignity of manner.”

Standing by the fireplace was another man, fair and almost ruddy, of rather heavy build, but alert and quick of speech. He was nearing sixty, but he seemed to take on, or to toss his years away from him, as might be his humour; a little preoccupied in manner, as if he were cheerfully but keenly considering some more important matter than the one immediately before him. He wore a frock-coat that gave him a business-like appearance; he might have been a prosperous tradesman or a valued shopwalker.

"This is Sir James Gilston," Mr. Bendish explained, "a neighbour of your uncle's at Wavercombe." She had never heard of Wavercombe. "I asked him to come and meet you, for he and I are joint-executors."

"I am afraid I must go in a few minutes—we had almost given you up," the neighbour said.

"I am sorry," she answered. "Of course I ought to have telegraphed. I didn't think of it." They noticed her articulation, low and clear and refined."

"Of course not. Let me give you this chair."

She sat down opposite them. Sir James looked at the calm face, and appeared to draw some definite conclusion, for he said "Humph!" in an undertone and stroked his nose. Then, as if he felt that he ought to make a remark, he said jocosely, "We don't expect your sex to be business-like; I prefer it myself when it is not." The voice was kind, but the manner was common: it didn't matter, he was just one of the new people she was out to meet.

Mr. Bendish looked different, clever and thoughtful, perhaps because, being the senior partner of the firm, he had arrived at the time when he had a certain amount of leisure to give to the intellectual diversions of life.

"I dare say you were grieved to hear of your uncle's death," he began; "it was sudden—"

"Very sudden indeed," Sir James said briskly.

"—And not much surprised at the rest of my letter—I mean with regard to his will?" Mr. Bendish went on.

"Oh yes, I was very much surprised. It is very kind of him—but I don't know yet what it means."

"The will has not been opened," Mr. Bendish be-

came professional in his manner, "but naturally its substance is known to us. We acted for him for a great many years. I never imagined he would go off so quickly. He was quite well three days ago——"

"I was never more suprised in my life," put in Sir James. "Only ten days ago I saw him superintending the putting up of some barbed wire at the end of his orchard at Wavercombe. He told me the boys got in to steal his apples and he thought it would tease them a bit. I never put any up at my place, though it is fifty times the size of his. I let the little devils steal an apple or two if they like."

"It's very sad—and so kind of you not to mind about the boys," Miss Fingal said, answering both ends of his remark.

Mr. Bendish took another swift look at her and wondered if she were a fool or a quiet humorist. The details of Mr. Fingal's will, he explained, would be made known in the usual way immediately after the funeral, "but it would be better to tell you at once that, virtually, everything is left to you," he added.

"He never seemed to like me much." She locked her hands as if to ensure her calmness, though it was never in danger.

"Your uncle was a very curious man," the lawyer explained, "with strong opinions. He thought it was the duty of every man at his death to make some contribution to the State or its Institutions, and to leave the rest of his property to the family he represented. You were the only relation he had, or at any rate with whom he kept in any sort of touch, and the property comes to you. It consists of the long lease of this house, a cottage at Wavercombe, and an income of at least £3000 a year." She could hardly take in the details of her good fortune. She looked up with wide-open eyes and an absent expression in them, while she thought that Mrs. Bailey was probably right; she would have to leave the flat. "You are a very fortunate young lady," he added, surprised at her placidity.

"An heiress—you must take care," Sir James said with a chuckling laugh; but he stopped when he saw

her face, she thought it was too soon for any one to laugh in that house, and he added rather lamely, "mustn't be too dissipated, you know, or marry in haste and repent at leisure."

"Oh no, I shan't do that," she looked at him reproachfully.

He wondered, as the lawyer had done, whether she was a fool and how the deuce she would spend her money. She ought to marry, of course: that would settle her. There was his son Jimmy—but he was a young ass and would want a girl with more go in her, though sometimes the quiet ones bucked up a bit; perhaps she would. "You must come and see us when you are at Wavercombe," he said; "we left town earlier than usual this year—fear we shan't come up for good again till the spring—going to Scotland in September; now, if you'll excuse me, Bendish, I'll go. I'm not wanted at present. By the way"—his tone became confidential—"did you see that poor Linda Alliston is getting rid of her husband? I am afraid she is breaking her heart over it."

"I'm sorry."

She was very fond of him, no doubt about that. I don't know what there is about the fellow, but all the women seem to like him."

"Well, he is a difficult man to hold."

"Lady Hester has gone to the Engadine. She always gets out of the way when there's any trouble about. Lady Hester is Lady Gilston's cousin, Miss Fingal—mother of Mrs. Alliston—lived in your cottage before your uncle bought it. Well, good-bye. Delighted if there's anything I can do, and glad to have met you. Circumstances sad, of course—better in future, I hope."

"I hope so too," she answered softly, "and thank you for—for your kindness."

"Don't mention it."

He thought as he crossed Bedford Square, "She hasn't spunk enough for Jimmy. I believe he'd like Linda, but she wouldn't look at him; good thing too—a delicate woman with two children, I should have them all on my hands—bad enough as it is with Lady Hester."

IV.

"You had better see the house, if you don't know it," the lawyer said, when he had locked up some papers in the drawer of the writing-table. He was a little puzzled what to do next with his client. She was looking at her own reflection in the highly polished marble mantelpiece, and up at an oil-painting above it of some worthy gentleman who was gradually retiring into blackness and oblivion; an ancestor of uncle John's and hers too, perhaps, who, judging from the stiff arrangement round his neck and the manner in which he brushed his hair, must have lived long ago. She dreaded hearing that she had more or less descended from him.

"Come," Mr. Bendish said firmly. He spoke for a moment to Stimson, who was at the end of the hall, before he walked up the wide staircase beside her.

"Of course everything here is yours now," he said, and looked at her as if expecting to see some effect of his words. But she merely said "Yes," as if she were not much interested, though a sense of possessions was being borne down upon her, and she was wondering what she would do with those at Battersea. She could not sell them, as Mrs. Bailey had suggested; it would seem cruel, after all the years she had lived with them. She thought especially of an autotype of the Sistine Madonna over the fireplace of her sitting-room, and quailed at the remembrance of the dark portrait in the study here. Was she going to see it every day? It looked as if it recognised and had been waiting for her, and the atmosphere of the house gave her a sense of continuity, of which she was a part, that filled her with

something like dread. Her curiosity needed bracing with courage as she entered the large double drawing-room for the first time. It looked dull and cold and bare; she felt that people who were dead had sat on the sofas and chairs, or fingered the books on the round satinwood table. At the end of the back room, on low black pedestals, were two white alabaster vases, very tall and slim and ghostly with glass shades over them. Uncle John had bought them many years ago in Pisa.

"They are very beautiful," the lawyer said; "I dare say they cost a great deal of money."

The hangings and covers of the furniture were faded and drab, there were two fire-screens with glass-covered landscapes worked in silk and enclosed in gilt frames, a satinwood piano, and a bookcase full of old books well bound; they too were guarded behind glass, as if only to be read on state occasions. When she had taken it all in, she hesitated and looked at the lawyer.

"Come up," he said with sudden solemnity, and she knew she was going to the bedroom above the drawing-room. He stopped before the door as if to gather the right deportment, then turned the key. She followed him in and peered through the dimness and shivered. It was very cold and still. A large mahogany wardrobe, and a cheval-glass near the window, came out of the gloom; and then an old-fashioned four-post bedstead with curtains and canopy. She turned her eyes towards it last of all. A linen sheet, very white and smooth, was spread over it; it outlined the form of uncle John lying beneath. . . . Was she going to sleep in that room presently? . . . Suddenly, with a sense of relief, she saw over the mantelpiece an autotype of the Sistine Madonna, much larger than the one in the little sitting-room at the flat. She felt that it would protect her in the long days and nights that were to come. She stood almost transfixed till Mr. Bendish put his hand on her shoulder. "Let us go down," he said. "Or would you rather see the other rooms first?"

"Oh no," she tried to prevent her voice from shaking, "it's all so strange, I would rather not see any more just now."

He carefully locked the door again, and they went towards the stairs.

"I don't know how I shall manage in such a big place. Do you think I must live here?" she asked appealingly.

"Your uncle wouldn't like to think that you lived anywhere else in London. You must gather some cheerful companions round you."

"I don't know anybody."

"You soon will. Friends and acquaintances grow up in a night when you become rich."

"But I'm not sure that I want them."

Mr. Bendish looked at her hopelessly. "Let us come in here for a moment," he said when they had reached the first floor. They re-entered the drawing-room and he shut the door, evidently to consult her on an important point; it brought the new position home to her. "I should like to speak to you about the servants," he said—"they lived with your uncle a good many years, and know all the ropes. Don't you think you had better keep them on?"

"Must I have many? I have never been used to manage servants."

"They'll manage themselves: there's an excellent cook-housekeeper, Mrs. Turner; and there's Stimson—a valuable servant. I believe they're all of them good creatures and won't give you any trouble—better keep them, they'll take care of you."

"But shall I be rich enough?"

"My dear young lady, you'll have three thousand a year and no rent to pay—except, of course, the ground rent here, which is a trifle; and if the money is better invested it will bring in twice as much; your uncle was a careful man, shy of investments that paid more than three and a half per cent."

"Oh," she said, "I don't know what I shall do with it all. I think you must look after it for me if you will."

"Most certainly. Gilston and I are trustees till—well, for the present—and as we knew your uncle for a great many years, of course, we shall take care of his niece." His speech soothed away many difficulties that

Stimson answered solemnly: "We will do our best, ma'am, our very best—all of us."

"One moment," Mr. Bendish said to her when they had reached the hall. "I should like to speak to you." They went to the library and his tone became business-like. "You will probably want to make arrangements for leaving your present abode, especially if you change your servants or——"

"But I haven't any servants—a woman comes in every morning to do for me."

"Well, perhaps you'll want to do something for the woman who comes in every morning," he suggested, with a pleasant smile on his firm lips. "There will naturally be a good many expenses—there always are at these times. Wouldn't it be some convenience to you if I gave you a cheque for £100—would £100 be enough?"

It took away her breath. "Oh, but—no, I couldn't——"

"It's not my money, it's your own. I'm only trying to be an agreeable executor and useful. Let me give it you at once." He took a cheque-book from his breast-pocket and a pen from the great inkstand on the writing-table. "I had better cross it. Who is your banker?"

"I always get my quarter's money from the bank at the corner of Sloane Street."

"Quite so—I dare say you will pay it in on your way back. I am glad I thought of it. Good-bye. On Thursday, here, at two o'clock"—they were in the hall by this time. "Stimson, a taxi for Miss Fingal."

A taxi! She was excited at last, though she showed no sign of it.

IV.

SHE walked from the Sloane Street bank in a dream, till she came to the houses in Cheyne Walk; then she looked up and realised with a little dismay that she was going away from them—away from the flat windows of the houses that were her friends, and the old-fashioned gardens; some of them were flagged and grass grew between their paving-stones, very green grass with sturdy upright blades. She felt as if they remembered different people from any who had lived in uncle John's house—old ladies with kind faces and white hands, who wore brocade dresses and carried lace-edged handkerchiefs, and old gentlemen with gold-topped sticks, and lappets to their coat pockets, who smiled benevolently at those who were younger. The houses in which they had lived had somehow become saturated with their sedate kindness, and gave out messages to those who understood: it was a hazy dream that sometimes just drifted through her consciousness, but it gave her a sense of content that nothing else in the world did.

Mrs. Bailey was waiting for her, which was out of the common, for she usually vanished at noon.

"I thought I'd like to hear how you got on, miss," she explained, "and that you might want a cup of tea to refresh you." She had set out the blue cup and saucer, and the kettle was on the spirit-lamp.

"It's very kind of you," Miss Fingal said gratefully.

"Well, it's weary work seeing the dead, I always think that. Did he look happy?"

"I didn't see him," the answer came with a little shudder, "there was a sheet over him."

"Poor dear, I wonder you didn't." Mrs. Bailey evi-

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A taxi! She was excited at last, though she showed no sign of it.

IV.

SHE walked from the Sloane Street bank in a dream, till she came to the houses in Cheyne Walk; then she looked up and realised with a little dismay that she was going away from them—away from the flat windows of the houses that were her friends, and the old-fashioned gardens; some of them were flagged and grass grew between their paving-stones, very green grass with sturdy upright blades. She felt as if they remembered different people from any who had lived in uncle John's house—old ladies with kind faces and white hands, who wore brocade dresses and carried lace-edged handkerchiefs, and old gentlemen with gold-topped sticks, and lappets to their coat pockets, who smiled benevolently at those who were younger. The houses in which they had lived had somehow become saturated with their sedate kindness, and gave out messages to those who understood: it was a hazy dream that sometimes just drifted through her consciousness, but it gave her a sense of content that nothing else in the world did.

Mrs. Bailey was waiting for her, which was out of the common, for she usually vanished at noon.

"I thought I'd like to hear how you got on, miss," she explained, "and that you might want a cup of tea to refresh you." She had set out the blue cup and saucer, and the kettle was on the spirit-lamp.

"It's very kind of you," Miss Fingal said gratefully.

"Well, it's weary work seeing the dead, I always think that. Did he look happy?"

"I didn't see him," the answer came with a little shudder, "there was a sheet over him."

"Poor dear, I wonder you didn't." Mrs. Bailey evi-

dently thought that Miss Fingal had neglected her duty, and she paused before putting the next question. "Has he done well by you, miss? If you don't mind my asking."

"Oh yes, he has done very—very well by me."

"I'm glad to hear it, I'm sure. And I dare say I was right—you'll be leaving the flat?"

"Yes, I'll be leaving the flat," she echoed, and looked out towards the balcony.

"You'll be sorry, I'm sure. Will it be soon, miss?"

"Yes, very soon."

"Would you like me to tell them at the office? You see, if that young couple was still wanting one they might be glad of it."

"Yes," Miss Fingal answered—it gave her a little wrench to say it. "I am going to live in Bedford Square."

"I know Bedford Square, a niece of mine was once housemaid there. They're fine houses, with lots of cleaning to them—but perhaps that won't matter."

"No, it won't matter; there are servants."

"A good many now, I dare say?"

"I think so—there's a man-servant."

Mrs. Bailey was getting at details and thoroughly enjoying herself. "Well now, think of that! you won't want the flat any more. That young couple might take it off your hands at once and be done with it—I dare say you'd make it a bit easy for them?"

"Easy for them? Yes, I'll make it easy—but in what way do you mean?" Miss Fingal was unused to business.

"Why, you see, you mightn't charge them till the half-quarter perhaps? And then there's the fittings—perhaps you would let them go cheap. Anything that wasn't wanted, I'd be glad to have, miss," firmly putting in a word for herself. "Is the house in Bedford Square furnished and ready for you?"

"Yes, it's furnished, and very soon it will be ready."

"I never! You'll want to get rid of these things then. I know a man in Lawrence Row who'd give you quite a fair price. Shall I speak to him?"

"Oh, I wouldn't sell them for the world," she roused herself, as became her new responsibilities. "I must think it all over, Mrs. Bailey, but you can tell them at the office that if the young couple want the flat—or any one does—I should like them to let me know."

"Yes, miss, certainly. And I'll be here in the morning." Mrs. Bailey felt herself dismissed.

With a sense of relief Miss Fingal watched her go. She wanted to try and realise that she was rich and going away. The riches, despite the hundred pounds she had carried to the bank not an hour ago, were abstract and vague as yet; she put the thought of them from her as being too intangible to grasp. The going away was a fact at which she stared blankly and surprised. She looked round the little square room and thought of the long years of peace, and wondered what sort of life was going to begin. A little curiosity and eagerness took hold of her. The window was open; she went out to the balcony. A band was playing, so far off that it was almost indistinct, but some children in the middle distance heard it plainly for they began to dance; she looked at them through the strange barrier that always seemed to be between herself and the world.

As she listened and watched, a smile came to her lips; she stood with her head thrown back, with the expanse of green at her feet, and the greater expanse of sky overhead, flecked with little fleecy clouds—and a dim sense of what might be came to her, the beginning of a fairy story suggested itself. She had probably many years to live—there were strange things to do and wonderful places to go to, if she could find out how to do them, how to go to them. She was not yet twenty-nine. The dressmaker's daughter in Chelsea, who made her navy-blue dress, was thirty-five and looked like a girl; but Miss Fingal had felt old ever since she was nineteen and went to live with her morose father in the London lodging. It was difficult to shake off the stillness, the growth, as of moss, that had almost closed into her life. She remembered a book she had brought back from the library once when she couldn't find a novel that looked interesting, a book of travel in Italy,

with pictures of beautiful places: she had thought how wonderful it would be to see them; she might see them now—some day, if she had courage. It would need so much courage to go to them alone, for she had never gone anywhere in her life except from the school in the country to her father's lodgings and to a dull seaside place once or twice with him, and back to the lodgings, and later to the flat at Battersea. . . . Then, being a woman, and under the direction of Mrs. Bailey, she remembered the conventionalities and the dress-maker in Chelsea. "I must go out in the morning," she thought, "and buy some black things."

On Thursday, feeling very strange in "the black things," she went to Bedford Square and sat in the drawing-room, the large desolate drawing-room with the blinds down, on the old-fashioned sofa with the bolster at each end, while uncle John was carried from the room above, past the closed door that hid her, and out of the house. Presently a kindly middle-aged woman of the superior servant class entered. "I thought I might venture to come, miss," she said; "I'm Turner, and been with Mr. Fingal as cook-housekeeper these seventeen years—is there anything I could do for you? If you'd lie down now and"—she looked at the hard little bolster—"I'll get you a pillow. Mr. Fingal wasn't one for cushions——"

"You are very kind," Miss Fingal said helplessly.

"There," when she had brought the pillow and put a sombre iron-grey eider-down over her, "they won't be back for a long time, then they are to go to the dining-room to read the will, and after that there'll be tea. You'll do better for a little rest, miss; this is the sort of day that doesn't come often, but it has to be got through."

A couple of hours later in the dining-room she was seated in the largest arm-chair—Sir James Gilston conducted her to it and insisted—while she listened to uncle John's will. Two thousand pounds to a hospital, the usual legacies to the executors, a year's wages to each of the servants, and everything else to his niece—Aline Mary Fingal. She made no sign: and it was very

strange, but she was beginning to accept the strangeness.

In an hour she was at the flat once more. She looked round at the familiar bits of furniture. There was no place for them in Bedford Square. "I don't feel half grateful enough for uncle John's kindness," she told herself, "I ought not to be sorry at all to go away. But I am, and I don't know what I shall do with all these things. Perhaps I'd better warehouse them in case I ever return."

VI.

THE young couple called to see the flat two days later. A happy middle-class couple, a little subdued in their behaviour, for they recognised that Miss Fingal was on a higher social level than themselves. He was a clerk in a house-agent's office, tall and fair and freckly, with a pleasant smile and a deferential manner that he tried to make easy. She was young and pretty, anxious to be lady-like, and with a quick eye for business. Miss Fingal liked them; she felt as if a bit of the park she had never entered had come to her, for they told her they had often walked there of an evening and looked up at her standing on the balcony. "But we never thought of coming to live here."

"It's a nice flat," Miss Fingal said; "I think you would be very happy—I am very fond of it," she added, —the words seemed to say themselves.

The young man considered for a moment or two. "Don't you think we might run to it, Vi?" he asked his sweetheart. "I can't see that we'd do better. There's nothing as good on our books at the office."

"We shouldn't be able to make it as nice as this." Vi looked round. "You see, Mr. Foale and I have only been engaged six months, and things take time to get," she explained.

Mr. Foale—his Christian appeared to be Bert—became more intimate in his tone. "We've been saving up," he said, "but it takes time, and costs a good deal to furnish a place like this. "Miss Clark," he indicated Vi with a little flourish of his hand, "will have to give up her work too when we're married."

"What work do you do?" Miss Fingal was ashamed of her own impertinence in asking.

"I am the cashier at Hanway's in King's Road." Miss Clark was rather pleased to proclaim it.

"And when are you going to be married?"

"Well—after next week. I leave on the Saturday, but we shall go away for about three or four days. Perhaps you wouldn't want to turn out so soon as that?"

"Yes, I am going to turn out in a few days, and I shall be so sorry if the flat is empty. It would be very sad after all the years I have lived in it." She spoke as if the flat were conscious.

"I believe it would be lovely," Vi said; "and you know, Bert, we'd try to make it look as much like this as possible."

Miss Fingal's heart warmed to her.

"I vote we take it," he answered, "and trust to luck."

"I should love it," Vi looked up at him with delight.

"What about the fittings?" Mr. Foale inquired. "I mean in the passages, and the oilcloth—fixtures generally. If you don't want too much for them, we might take them off your hands."

"Oh, I don't want anything for them. I shall be so glad if they are useful to you."

"Don't want anything?" Vi exclaimed. "How lovely of you! Oh, Bert!"—with a little burst of joy—"I know we shall be very happy here. Is there nothing to pay to come in, blinds or anything——?"

"No—no blinds or anything." Miss Fingal was almost excited. A sudden thought had struck her. "Are you going to buy furniture?" she asked.

"Yes, we've got to buy everything," Bert answered cheerfully; "we shall have to do it gradually, but——"

"Let me give you all this"—she looked round with lingering affection at her little home. "I should like to think of you two living here and being happy; perhaps it would help you?"

"Give us! Give us what?" he asked unbelievably.

"These things," their owner said humbly.

"You don't mean this furniture?"

"I should like you to have it, if you don't mind."

"Mind!" Bert exclaimed. "I never heard of anything so extra—extra ripping in my life; but we could manage to give you something."

"I couldn't bear to sell it. And I should like the flat to look the same."

"But I say, Vi!" Mr. Foale turned to his young woman.

"Do you mean all these things?" Vi wondered if she were awake.

"Yes, everything." Miss Fingal looked up at the autotype of the Sistine Madonna over the fireplace. Vi noticed it.

"You must have that anyhow," she said.

Miss Fingal shook her head. "No, I shouldn't like to see it taken down. And there is one where I am going." She thought of the large one in the Oxford frame at Bedford Square. There was no occasion to take this little one of past years; the chapter of life with which it was concerned had finished. The lovers stood looking up at it wonderstruck. "I should like you to have it as a wedding present," she explained with a strange little laugh, she had never given any one a wedding present before, "and to think that you will look at it sometimes when you are alone." The last sentence was said to Vi.

"Well, but—I can't get over it!" the young man burst out. "Do you mean that you are going to give us all the things here? Why, you hadn't set eyes on us an hour ago."

"I'm going to give them all to you. If you live in the flat, because I want them to be here. If there are one or two that you can't use, I should like Mrs. Bailey to have them, if you don't mind. She is the woman who comes in to do for me."

"Well, I never did!" he exclaimed under his breath.

"She got our address and came and told us about the flat," Vi said. "She offered to come and do for us in the morning if we took it. We shall be awfully glad of her sometimes, for of course we can't afford a servant. And we'll give her anything that's of no use," a promise

of which the humour was not apparent to any one of the three.

"It all seems to fit in," Miss Fingal said, and it was wonderful how much comfort the arrangement gave her.

She was glad when they went; she listened gratefully to their footsteps descending the stairs, to their low-toned rejoicing voices as they reached the second flight. Then she shut the door and sat down. She knew now that she was really going to Bedford Square—the flat would go on without her—without her, and it would look just the same. . . . The young couple would stand on the balcony; sometimes they would go over to the park and walk about under the trees, and come back, laughing and happy, and the things—her things—would be waiting for them in the little flat she would probably never see again.

A few days later she left it for ever. The key was given to Mrs. Bailey, and to Mrs. Bailey she gave most of her clothes, for the Sloane Street shops and the hundred pounds had done well by her, though her discreet choice of outward garments, and the fact that she felt she owed uncle John the tribute of wearing black, caused little change in her appearance.

Mrs. Bailey received her gifts with more emotion than she had formerly shown for cast-offs, and the climax of a five-pound note, a fresh crisp one from the bank, fairly took away her breath. "I knew she was a lady, you can always tell," she thought as she looked after the taxi and the three trunks of very moderate size. "Fancy her givin' me five pounds, never knew such a thing in my life; for no matter what people are, they're often close enough with their money; give you a thing or two they can't wear any longer themselves, but they won't part with their cash if they can help it. Well, I'm sorry to see the last of her!"

"The servants, who were all middle-aged, even the second housemaid was well over thirty, assembled themselves in the hall in an old-time manner for Miss Fingal's arrival. Unconsciously, they were rather sorry for her, as if they recognised the bewilderment that made her almost speechless.

"I suppose your luggage will come on, miss?" Stimson inquired.

"No, I have brought everything; I haven't any other luggage at all," she told him.

"Thank you, miss."

The taxi was paid. The door was shut.

"You'll come upstairs, won't you, miss?" Mrs. Turner's voice was kind and welcoming; and the new mistress went up, telling herself with every stair she trod that she had come to live in uncle John's house.

VII.

THEN the round of day and night began. She felt isolated and half afraid, as if she were an intruder; it seemed unbelievable that this big house was her own, and that all these large pieces of furniture belonged to her. It was absurd, of course, but in a sense they frightened her. They looked so grim and cold. She was thankful that the dining-room had a Turkey carpet. On the stairs, in the drawing-room and in the library behind the dining-room, everywhere, there was Brussels carpet, patient, uncompromising, and in excellent condition; there was no excuse for renewing it, it never occurred to her to do that, but it was hard and unyielding to the tread, and the patterns on it seemed to look up at her with curious malice. The hearth-rugs matched the carpets; there were no skins or Persian rugs suggestive of far-off lands and turbaned people, of burning sun and bluest sky. There were only brown-fibre mats with red borders outside the doors. Everything in the house seemed to be cold and repellant, and helped to give her a sense of finality,—the wide street door that opened to show a hall with large black-and-white squares, icy to the feet, and the broad shallow stairs that generations of sedate well-conducted people had gone up and down for a hundred years—two hundred years perhaps—she didn't know how long the house had been standing. But she felt, for her thoughts were never very clear or definite, that all its tenants had been staid and middle-aged, slow of step, severe of speech, important and well-conducted. Now it was her turn to be important and well-conducted. She was living alone, as uncle John

had lived, and those many others before him had lived, in the large hollow house, the house of silences so complete that even echoes had deserted it. This was the history of her life. There was nothing more to happen till some day she would lie on the great bed upstairs, as uncle John had lain, to be carried out with a shuffling of feet as he had been, and then people would listen to the reading of her will, as she had listened to the reading of his: she wondered who the strange people would be who followed after; but she wondered placidly.

The servants were an immense comfort to her. At first she spoke to them with doubt and inward trembling, but gradually this gave way to a sense of security and of gratitude that they had consented to stay, to eat good food and receive their excellent wages. And she had reason to be grateful, for she would not have known how to set about re-organising the household and apportioning out the duties of each domestic: she had never stayed in houses of the Bedford Square sort, she had visited nowhere. Her way in the world had been taken through furnished lodgings and the Battersea flat.

Battersea!

She thought of it with a little smile and wondered how the young couple were getting on, if they employed Mrs. Bailey, and whether, in the evening, they stood out on the balcony and watched the people in the park across the way; but they would feel that it was their own world they looked upon, their own people who went to and fro, or sat about, or made holiday. There would be no invisible barrier between them as there had been between her and all that they represented.

Sometimes the contemplation of her life and its surroundings provoked thoughts that were new to her. They seemed to come from outside sources, not to be evolved by her own heart and brain; but her limitations and lack of experiences, of real knowledge of any sort, put them into a *cul de sac*. Life, she felt on one of these occasions, had such different bits for people, and it seemed just a chance which bit was dealt out to any one. To her there had been given this share of monotony, of dulness, of high respectability, and now

of affluence. "I ought to be satisfied," she said to herself, "I never dreamt I should be rich—" and gratitude became a daily exercise. It began every morning in the large room in which she awakened, with a passing remembrance of uncle John. The housemaid came in with tea and thin bread and butter, a luxury she had never known before and hardly appreciated. But she had no courage to reject it, or to alter what she felt to be the domestic regulations of the house. Breakfast was always served in the library, the gaunt, hoary-looking room with the books in dilapidated brown leather. There was a little Pembroke table on one side with two flaps; it was brought forward in the morning and her breakfast laid upon it. "Mr. Fingal always had it here, miss," Stimson told her the first morning, "and we thought you would like to do the same."

"Oh yes," she said, and meekly sat down to it. He lifted the cover from the hot dish, looked at it critically, put the toast-rack nearer to her and the paper beside her, there were no letters, and departed. And the rest of the day matched the beginning.

Gradually she tried to put more into her life; she subscribed to Mudie's, which was near, and going to it gave her an excuse to look towards the railings of the British Museum—they fascinated her. One day she entered in at the gates, up the steps, through the swinging door and along the galleries that held the Elgin marbles. There were two youths looking at them; she heard one of them say he was coming to draw on student days in the winter if he had time. Bits of broken marble, hundreds of years, perhaps thousands of years old, she told herself; and still people stood before them and wondered and wanted to learn from them. It frightened her to think of all that people had done hundreds of years ago, and to see the living people to-day, swift of step or lingering to admire, eager to imitate, perhaps to create in their turn, that which would stay in the world for hundreds of years to come. The words ran in her head like the refrain of a song—hundreds of years—hundreds of years. She went out into the hall again, more people, living people entering

and going through two swinging doors on her left. She tried to follow them, and was told that the reading-room was beyond and she must get an order if she wanted to see it. Then she looked up at the dome and round at the galleries with the thousands and thousands of books on their shelves, and felt as if something in her had reached out a little farther towards actualities; but still there was an imperceptible barrier between her and them.

She had not realised what her money could do yet, and as the autumn days grew shorter, she was content to stay in the house and think over her new position. One day it struck her that she would have the satin-wood piano tuned and something done to the discoloured keys; it was sweet-toned and easy to play. Sometimes she tried to remember the melodies of her school-days and one or two bits of Grieg, but it was always a feeble little performance, and she knew it.

Mr. Bendish duly sent his wife to call when she returned from the country. Miss Fingal looked at her gratefully, but she had nothing to say, and Mrs. Bendish came to the conclusion that she was no good for social purposes. Her husband agreed with her; nevertheless, a little later they invited her to a dinner-party ten days ahead. Miss Fingal had no excuse for refusing their invitation, for it was some time now since uncle John had died. So she ordered a black evening frock, with as little décolletage as the dressmaker would allow, and a pair of black satin shoes. She surveyed them with trepidation and surprised pleasure, and sedately enjoyed trying them on before the cheval-glass that stood aslant by the window in her room.

But when the night came it needed courage to go out in her unaccustomed attire. The tortoise-shell comb in her hair, and two or three trinkets that had belonged to a grandmother (taken from their cotton-wool shelter) added to her sense of strangeness. She entered the room with an air of appealing curiosity, and her eyes wider open than usual. "She looks as if she had been to sleep and wonders where she is," a woman said to some one next her.

The other women were smarter; they had heaps of things to say, to laugh at and discuss, and Miss Fingal felt abashed. The world was such a strange place, she thought, so many people were in it, but a few—and she was one—were kept outside; always that sense, the sense of not having entered it, was with her. The only fellow-guest who tried to be agreeable to her was Jimmy Gilston. Luckily he took her in. He was a kind young man, with a good honest dislike for work, bored by his father's second wife, and generally at a loose end.

"How are you getting on in Bedford Square?" he asked her genially.

"I don't know—oh, I think I'm getting on very well," she answered, in the strange little voice that seemed ashamed of being heard. "Bedford Square is very nice."

"I like those old houses myself. I went there once or twice when your respected uncle was alive, and couldn't help thinking that if the servants were buried and the furniture burned and the entire place turned inside out, it would be rather ripping to live there. I expect that's what you'll do, isn't it?"

"Oh, I wouldn't for the world. I should be afraid. Uncle John liked it as it is——"

"Afraid of what—his ghost?"

"I don't know."

"When are you going to Wavercombe?"

"I don't know," she answered again.

"I wish she'd know something," he thought, "this is rather hard work. But she's a nice little female, or would be if she were well shaken, or fell in love with a soldier, or encountered a catastrophe of some sort." He tried again. "Wavercombe's rather a dull hole, you know—luckily for me I don't live there. My father gave us a stepmother, so when it was possible I came up to London."

"Do you do anything?" she asked.

"Yes, I do a good many things," he answered; "but if you mean do I do any work or have I any profession, no, I don't do any work. I'm reading for the Bar—but I shan't be any good at it. I expect I'm a rotter."

"A rotter?"

"A rotter," he repeated with solemnity and conviction. "Don't you wish you were one? It means being no use, but having a good time, or remembering one. What do you do with yourself all day?"

"I don't know," she answered again. "I find everything very strange."

"Well, if you won't think me rude, it's my opinion that you want waking up. I should like to take you to a music-hall one night."

"Oh, no, I couldn't"—she was alarmed, "it would be unkind—so soon after uncle John's death," she added.

"Well, but you hardly knew him, and he's quite used to being where he is by this time; besides, people don't sit at home in sackcloth and ashes now and mourn for an uncle—or for anybody long."

"Don't they?"

"No, it has come to be recognised that one has to die and there's an end of it, and it's no good making too much fuss about it. I don't believe you have half grasped your position yet, or realised what a good time you might have. But you will in six months. You must let Bertha go and see you when she comes back. She'll put you up to a thing or two."

"Who is Bertha?"

"My sister. She is staying now with our humble relations in the country and won't be home for some time; she has a little flat in London and goes about on her own."

"Why is Wavercombe a hole?"

"It isn't really, but the people who live round about give one the impression of standing on their hind-legs to look at each other, and greatly approving."

"Oh!"

"But your cottage is a jolly little place. You ought to go and see it—wooden gate, flag-stoned pathway to front door; trees—an ilex at the side, hollyhocks and that sort of things in front—crimson ramblers—you know; trees and flowers behind, lawn with acacia tree in the middle, awfully nice to sit under it for tea, lots of trees all over the place, and through a gate with creaking

iron hinges—Linda used to swing on it when she was a kid. At the side of the garden there's an orchard——”

“The boys used to steal uncle John's apples,” she said, remembering Sir James's remark. “That was why he put up barbed wire.”

“Dare say they enjoyed them more than he did.”

“I shall take down the barbed wire. I shouldn't like them to be hurt.”

“Rather immoral to encourage stealing, of course, but also rather nice of you.” He stared at her benevolently, and explained. “I am taking a good look at you—rather short-sighted, you know; take a good look at me, then one of us will be sure to know the other next time.”

She looked up and saw a fair young man, tall and loose-limbed (though this was not discernible at table), with a good-natured face, a rather wide mouth, lank fair hair, and blue eyes that smiled behind pince-nez.

“I have looked at you,” she told him with a demure smile.

“Well then, now let's get on with our talk. Briarpatch——”

“Briarpatch?”

“Didn't you read ‘Uncle Remus’ when you were young?”

“No, I was always at school.”

“Ah—of course, they never do anything sensible at school. Some aristocratic but impecunious relations of my stepmother's had your cottage, bought it and rebuilt it when I was a boy, and I christened it for them out of ‘Uncle Remus.’ Your uncle only bought it about a year ago, when Linda Alliston came to grief.” He stopped for a moment. “We used to slide on the pond together when she was a kid. There's a highly respectable pond—skating in the winter—can you skate?” he asked, with a twinkle.

“I don't know.” He made a laughing grimace at her. “I never tried,” she added hastily.

“Well, I'm going to talk to you like a father, if you don't mind,” he said. “You should learn to do things—everything that comes your way—chuck away those

you don't like and stick to those you do; it's the only way to enjoy life."

"Is it?" She looked up questioningly.

"It is." He solemnly nodded his head.

"I don't know how to begin," she said, with a queer little smile as she got up from her seat, "but I shall think about what you have said—and you are very kind," she added, to his surprise. She was grateful to him for talking to her; he felt it and liked her. "But she is a little stick-in-the-mud," he thought. "A few shocks would do her good."

Later, when he saw her sitting silent and apart in the drawing-room, he went up to her; but she had no small-talk. "Look here," he said in despair, as he got up to go, for he had a lively supper engagement, "will you let me come and see you some day?"

"I should like it very much," she answered without much cordiality, though she felt that she would like him to come.

"She's no good—can't get out of her native shell, it sticks to her," he thought.

"My dear," Mrs. Bendish said to her husband that night, "I'm sorry for your heiress; but she is a dull little thing, there's nothing to be done with her."

He was busy with his papers and answered absently, "Then leave her alone. It can't be helped."

A week or two later Miss Fingal heard that the Bendish child was ill. She had never known any children, and was somehow afraid of them; but she sent it a beautiful orange tree, and wrote a formal sympathetic little note that brought a grateful mother round the next day. But she only looked dismayed, and said as if she were apologising, "It's very kind of you to come. I thought perhaps she'd like an orange tree."

"Of course she did, and it was so lovely of you to think of it, not to send cut flowers, as most people do when they want to send something."

Miss Fingal was silent for a moment before she added, "You see the weather is rather cold, and I thought it would make her think of Italy and warm places where oranges grow."

"How nice of you; that would never have occurred to any one else. Have you been much to Italy?"

"No; I never went there at all—or anywhere."

"But you will?"

"Yes, perhaps." Then, in a tone that was almost like a suppressed longing: "I want to see all the things—I mean the beautiful things—that people made for the world hundreds of years ago."

Mrs. Bendish was quite surprised. "What a queer idea! I never thought of it in that way—I always live in the future and look forward, and never trouble about hundreds of years ago."

"I feel as if they were reaching out sometimes," Miss Fingal answered, "as if I could see and hear things that happened in them. It isn't that I think of them—they come and go when my eyes are shut, just for a moment, but only since I came to this house."

"It is a rather ghostly place, and I expect you are a good deal alone?"

"Oh yes; but I have always been alone."

"I should like to cheer up this room." Mrs. Bendish looked round it. "Some loose covers—a gay chintz, you know, and heaps of cushions, would do wonders for it. In fact, I should like to do up the whole house—to alter it. You must be very dull sometimes."

"Oh no, I am not dull, and it is very restful to wait between."

"To wait between what?"

"The things that happen. There is always a time between. Don't you think that life is like a story in chapters, one chapter begins and goes on and ends—quite ends; and then another begins and goes on and ends, and they're all different."

Mrs. Bendish looked at her and was puzzled; the placid expression of the face had not changed, the grey eyes looked back at her questionly, but calmly.

"How have your chapters been divided?" she asked.

Miss Fingal thought for a moment before she answered. "There was the one at school, it was full of things to do that were not very interesting; but I suppose they had to be done and learnt."

"Yes?"

"It was like a first chapter. And then the one with my father. That went on for two years. He died, and that came to an end." She lifted her anxious face and added, "It was very sad, for I don't think he was happy, and it made him complain of the world."

"And then?"

"I went to Battersea: that one was eight years long."

"Were you dreadfully bored?"

"No—it was so peaceful, and it was more cheerful than this, for there was a balcony to stand on and I could look at the Park. I think I used to feel as if I were resting after a long journey that I didn't remember."

"But surely you hated Battersea?"

"No, I liked it. I felt so apart, and it was interesting to look at the people and to wonder about them. I shall never see that bit of the world again."

"It ended too?"

"Yes, quite suddenly one morning, when the letter came from Mr. Bendish, saying that uncle John was dead."

"But weren't you delighted—I mean——"

"I was very sorry, though I never knew him well or thought about him much."

"And the next chapter?"

"That is going on, and I don't know how it will end, or what it means. But you see it all divides, and is very interesting, just as I said."

"Yes, it's very interesting," Mrs. Bendish echoed, and got up to go. She felt that the visit had been a success.

"I liked her better than I did before, perhaps because of the orange tree," she told her husband; "but there was something almost uncanny about her when she spoke of hundreds of years ago—I felt as if she had lived then and left her soul behind when she came on."

"You don't know what you mean by a soul."

"One feels many things of which one doesn't know the meaning."

"You've been talking to Linda Alliston," he said

impatiently. "This sounds like her stuff, poor thing. When did you see her last?"

"To-day," Mrs. Bendish confessed.

"Ah, I thought so! How is she?"

"She looked dreadfully ill. I believe she is breaking her heart."

"I saw Alliston the other day—he's a good-looking dog—it's a pity that such a really nice chap couldn't do better with life."

VIII.

THE autumn months dragged on; Miss Fingal accepted their greyness as inevitable, though sometimes a little dreary smile came to her lips when she looked at the sedate boundaries of Bedford Square and remembered the distances that had filled her eyes so often in the bygone years. She saw Mr. Bendish once or twice; he was reinvesting her money and putting her affairs in order, but she took little interest in them herself. His wife had gone to the south of England with their delicate children, so there were no more invitations to dinner or afternoon visits from her. Sir James Gilston appeared one morning, feeling, as he put it to Mr. Bendish, that—"Fingal treated us handsomely, you know, and we ought to keep an eye on his heiress, for the first year or so, at any rate." She was glad to see him; he was easy to get on with, and his vulgarity was not offensive.

"Pretty comfortable?" he asked. Properly grieved for the uncle and not chuckling too openly over his will? I wish we were in town; Lady Gilston thinks it the right thing to stay in the country at this time of year, so I'm bound to stick it too. She'll tell a different tale soon, when Dorothy comes out; and as she's sixteen, it won't be long. I come up two or three times a week to see they are all right at the office. Doesn't do to slacken too much; things run down if the boss doesn't keep them wound up. I get a bit bored too at Wavercombe; there's some shooting, but others find more fun in it than I do. We have a little farm close to our place, across the field. I get something out of that—pleasure, I mean, for it doesn't pay yet, though we've done pretty well with pigs and milk. My lady takes an

interest in the dairy, so that's all right. By the way, I hear you met Jimmy at the Bendish dinner-party. What did you think of him?"

"He was very kind."

"Oh!" Sir James was rather puzzled at this answer. "He said he offered to take you to a music-hall, but you wouldn't go." He considered for a moment, looked at her, stroked his nose, and went on suddenly: "He isn't brilliant, a bit idle, but a good chap. I wish he'd settle down with a wife who'd keep him in order."

"Perhaps he doesn't want to be kept in order."

"Dare say; we none of us care about it—do we?—but it would be good for him. Well, you won't see me again just yet. We start for Montreux to-morrow, staying there over Christmas. We shall send for the two school-girls from Lausanne, for the holidays. I'll come and see you as soon as I'm back. By the way, young lady, Bendish tells me you've drawn a good deal of cash lately?"

"I wanted it," she answered.

"But you've not paid away any cheques—taken it all in cash?"

"I didn't want to send cheques with my name on."

"Not been speculating? You see we are in charge of your interests for the present, so I ought to look after you a bit."

"I've not been speculating," she answered coldly.

He persisted, for he had so little control over his own family that he enjoyed trying to exercise some over his ward. "I'm afraid, my dear young lady, just as a matter of duty, I want you to tell me for what purpose you wanted these rather large sums."

"It's my own money," she pleaded. "I thought I could spend it as I liked."

"Of course, but your sex is easily imposed upon. Any poor relations you want to help?" She shook her head. "Charity is often a mistake—unless you know what you're about."

"It isn't charity to give to people who need it. I tried to do that—but I didn't want them to know or to be thanked."

"You should make inquiries—there are so many impostors."

"I would rather take my chance of that," she answered, "than hurt people who are not impostors—besides, impostors feel pain just as other people do. Please let me do what I like, Sir James, and don't ask me about it." She looked up at him, the soft eyes shaded by the dark lashes were effective.

"Didn't know they were so good," he thought. "Well, of course," he said, "you must do as you please, and it's very good of you. I make a point of only giving to recognised institutions and popular movements myself, and of seeing it properly acknowledged in print. I'm a great believer in print, keeps things above board; but ladies, especially young ones and rich as you are, like their own way, eh? Now good-bye. See you when we come back. Lady Gilston has been hoping to make your acquaintance before we went, but she hasn't had a moment to spare when she has been in town." He looked back as he was going, with—"Mind you run down and see the cottage. Mark of respect to the uncle, besides, it looks now as if you were a London sparrow." He was growing more familiar, and had an idea that a slightly hilarious manner would wake her up a bit. "We shan't be there again just yet, probably not till Easter; but there are lots of nice people in the neighbourhood at Wavercombe—residential people—who will be certain to call on you. I've told them all about you," he added with the air of a benefactor.

She went two days later. "Just for a week or ten days," she informed Mrs. Turner, thinking that people would hardly know she was there if she stayed so short a time; she wanted to avoid the callers as long as possible.

Wavercombe was a quiet little place, with a sleepy station. When she arrived it looked desolate, and a drizzling November rain was falling. Luckily there was a fly waiting outside—Stimson, who had gone the day before, had seen to that. It was open, but with the

hood pulled down well over her head, and a thick leather apron dragged high up in front, she was sheltered. Outside the station a roadway, still in the making, led to what might in the future be the main street of a little town. Along it, with a strip of new asphalt pavement in front of them, were a few shops, struggling to look prosperous; a bookseller's with the word Bazaar above it, and a poulterer's with a row of birds hung across the outside, suggested what Sir James had called residential people. And of these there were other evidences: protected by screens of trees or closed gates, were dwelling-houses of the sort that signified retirement and a good income. In the distance a large house with a square tower could be seen. As if holding aloof from the more prosperous, and yet waiting near on the chance of usefulness, were a few picturesque cottages with gardens in front; and here and there an isolated one, looking as if it had strayed onwards towards the countryside that looked dull and grey.

In the summer it all would be different, Miss Fingal thought, but even now it appealed to her in an unimaginative way. She could see the Surrey hills in the distance, pathetic and misty, waiting for the spring to wrap them in the blue that was their own, and presently in the foreground was the darkness of a fir wood. Oh yes, it would look quite different in the spring, she told herself again; she had come too soon—but it didn't matter. . . . The old cob ambled on. Some clumps of gorse, brown and dead, some withered heather and leafless trees, and then a stretch of well-kept road, with gravel for future use heaped on one side of it, and on the other a high wall that reached to gates of beautifully wrought iron; then more wall with brown twigs of creeper wandering over it that suggested a garden behind; against the green-edged footway by the roadside there were one or two benches for tired wayfarers. She leant forward and could see the top windows of a large house, set back from the road and approached by a short avenue of beeches.

"Who lives at this place?" she asked.

"That's Beechwood — Sir James Gilston's. They

brought them gates from Italy two years ago and had a deal of bother to get them up. They're away now, gone abroad for a bit."

A quarter of a mile farther the road forked and on one side was a long narrow pond. It must be the one Jimmy Gilston spoke of, she thought, as being good for skaters. It looked leaden and resentful now in the falling rain; at its abrupt end there was a high bank, a clump of trees, almost a copse, and beyond them a green with a few cottages huddled in one corner. Across the green a little shop, a post-office, a rustic inn called The Dragon's Teeth; and then set back and apart, with a wooden paling and tall trees looking over it within and without, a garden winding backwards on one side and an orchard on the other, was the cottage. A white gate with Briar-patch painted in black letters on its top rail, a flagged pathway with flower-beds on either side and more trees, an ilex-tree, and thick growths entwining and clustering towards the boundaries. The white front door was open, Stimson and a middle-aged woman in black came out to meet her. Stimson said, "This is Mrs. Webb, miss." The woman added, "Pleased to see you, miss. I'll do all I can to make you comfortable," and Miss Fingal realised that she had arrived at her own place—another place where she was the all-important owner. She smiled as she entered a small square hall, warmed by a wood fire that lighted up the brass dogs on its red-brick hearth. Through the open door on the left a cheery room seemed to welcome her. It had a crackling wood fire, too, and chintz covers of the sort that Mrs. Bendish had suggested for Bedford Square, and a small and very low revolving bookcase full of new-looking books that could be reached from the easy-chair by the fireside. Even in that first moment she felt that it was a blessedly different place from the one with which uncle John was identified in London—a place to be happy in, to live in, with no haunting memories of dead people.

She unfastened her coat. "Emma will take it"—a tall thin girl in a stiff white cap and apron came forward—"my niece," Mrs. Webb explained, "she always helped when Mr. Fingal came, and before

that," she added. "You'll be longing for a cup of tea, miss?"

Emma took the coat and, by shaking up the silk cushions in the chair by the fire, invited Miss Fingal to sit down. Mrs. Webb brought in some tea, and then the new arrival was mercifully left to her own reflections. She heard Stimson go upstairs, and knew that he was carrying the suit-case and dressing-bag that was all her luggage, and she wondered, for dependants still embarrassed her, what she ought to do next, what was expected of her, and felt shy of moving without a sign from some one who would unconsciously give her a lead. Presently it came in the shape of Mrs. Webb, who returned and suggested that perhaps Miss Fingal would like to see her room.

It was obviously the best room; it looked fresh, but sleepy and curiously patient, as if it were waiting for some one to come and claim it. There were casement windows with flowered chintz curtains to them, and a low brass bedstead with a blue silk eider-down—she gave a sigh of satisfaction when she saw it, and remembered the four-poster in which she had slept last night. Near the window there was a little inlaid escritoire, open, with two brass candlesticks and candles, and dainty writing apparatus; above it a row of attractive-looking books. On the hearth a wood fire crackled and blazed, and beside it hung a little old-fashioned polished wooden bellows with a brass nozzle.

"It's such a very nice room," she said with a happy taken-by-surprise look on her face.

"Yes, miss. And that," she nodded to a door facing the windows, "was Mr. Alliston's dressing-room. It looks on to the lawn at the back. You can't see it this weather, but it's lovely in the summer. They used to be out there a good deal."

"They?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Alliston, I mean, miss. This used to be Mrs. Alliston's when she was here, before Mr. Fingal had the cottage, and it's just as she left it. Perhaps you know her, miss?"

"No?" There was a question in the voice, and Mrs.

Webb responded quickly, with the air of one who had a story to tell.

"You see, miss, the cottage belonged to Lady Gilston's cousin, Lady Hester Markham. When Miss Linda, that was her daughter, married Mr. Alliston, Lady Hester gave it them and went abroad herself. I did hear that she lost a lot of money gambling in France, and couldn't come back, but you never can tell."

"And Mr. and Mrs. Alliston lived here?"

"Well, they were up and down. Mr. Alliston didn't care for Wavercombe. There were no links near, and he was a great one for golf, and I don't think he liked Lady Gilston, and she invited them there a good deal. Sir James used to come and fetch them, so they couldn't help themselves."

Miss Fingal sat down in the arm-chair by the fire listening to the history of the cottage that was hers now. It seemed as if she had to hear it; but it was a little confusing. Mrs. Webb was quite ready to go on. "It was Mrs. Alliston who made the place what it is. Mr. Alliston didn't care for the gentry round, though they're very nice, miss, so they brought down their own visitors from London. They were happy, I can tell you. They thought the world of each other and used to laugh for joy, and run in and out of the trees in the orchard and all that, but it only lasted a little while. . . . Then Mr. Alliston used to go to London, and Mrs. Alliston stayed here alone—and he'd come for week-ends—then he didn't come at all, or only seldom."

"I see," very coldly. She did not want to hear more about the Allistons from Mrs. Webb.

Mrs. Webb was rather disappointed at the seeming lack of interest in her listener, but went on undaunted. "Mr. Alliston behaved badly, and they were separated—it just broke Mrs. Alliston's heart—and the cottage was sold to Mr. Fingal. Before that Mr. Fingal used to take the Vicarage every September, but he didn't like it, because there were texts over the washstands, and he didn't approve of any fuss made with religion."

"Was he here much?"

"Oh no, miss, only now and then, by fits and starts. You see, he died, poor gentleman."

"Did he sleep in this room?" She couldn't imagine uncle John doing that, or reading the books, or sitting at the *escritoire*.

"No, miss," and then, as if she divined what had been in her listener's mind, Mrs. Webb added, "and he didn't touch a thing he could help—he wasn't one for altering, and he liked the room looking out on the orchard. All the rooms are just as Mrs. Alliston left them. He bought the cottage, but he never altered anything in it. Would you like Emma to come and help you presently? She's a handy girl, and can do a bit of maiding."

Miss Fingal shook her head. "No, thank you; but I should like to rest a little while—if I may," she added meekly, still unused to so much attention.

"Yes, miss, of course you would—and I must see to your dinner. Mr. Stimson was very particular about ordering it."

The door was shut, and the new owner of the cottage sat very still by the fire, thinking of Linda Alliston. She had not heard much about her, only of her happiness and a hint of tragedy, but vaguely, mistily, as if in a dream, details seemed to fill themselves in.

"It's the second young couple I have come across," she thought. "There was the one at the flat—I wish I could see them without their knowing it—and now there is this one that I have never seen at all; yet I feel as if I were so near their lives." It almost hurt her to think they had had to give up the cottage. She felt as if she ought to give it back to them, and wondered if anything could give them back their happiness. It was strange that people who loved each other and were happy, should part and be miserable. "They must like having the happiness to remember," she told herself; but it all belonged to that part of the world in which she had no share.

She heard the drip-drip of the rain outside, falling on the garden. The outward darkness shrouded the trees and stole into the room, that seemed to feel in itself a

strangeness that she should be there. But there was nothing ghostly about it. This cottage was remembered by living people; it seemed to belong to them still, rather than to her, or than it had to uncle John. She felt as if she were in charge of it, as if it were a trust. She smiled dreamily at the smouldering wood.

"I think it would be beautiful to see them here again," she said to herself, while she made ready for her little dinner; and afterwards, while she was seated at the table, at which they had sat only two or three years ago, she imagined them looking across it with happy faces and laughing for joy.

IX.

It rained intermittently during the first three days of her visit. The countryside was shrouded in mist, the grey sky stooped over the grey pond and the sodden green; and the fact that Webb's father, who lived twenty miles off, was ill and sent for him, prevented Miss Fingal from taking an active interest in the garden. She went for a walk every day: with human beings she felt lonely and apart, but as she tramped the damp roads or gently pushed through the brier-obstructed by-ways, she felt as if the drooping lindens and dark firs, and the dim hills in the distance, drew her towards them with an indefinite magnetism—not with any realised satisfaction but as an atom belonging to a whole.

After the first evening she did not think much about the Allistons. It was as if memories of them, lingering in the cottage, had come forth on her arrival and then adjusted themselves to later happenings. When it was impossible to go out she sat by the fire reading the books near at hand in the revolving bookcase, or looked out at the dripping orchard and up at the tall trees beyond, with a sense of wonderment at knowing they were hers, that she was among them and would probably see them at intervals all her life long. It pleased her to think it. The stillness, the freshness and charm of her surrounding, saturated her with a calm contentment that was a blessed surprise, a codicil, a postscript, added to uncle John's endowment. It came to an end one afternoon when a motor stopped at the gate and Stimson hurriedly appeared.

"Sir George and Lady Francis from the Tower House

are at the door, miss," and a minute later, in an impressive voice, he announced them.

They entered slowly. Lady Francis was a kindly-looking stout lady who, when she had smiled and got through the usual greetings, hesitated before the chair on which she was about to sit—a Rossetti one with a rush seat and thin arms.

"I am not sure—" she began.

Miss Fingal understood. "Oh, but do sit here," she indicated an easier and stronger one, with a silk cushion at its back. Then, with benevolent graciousness, the visitors began their talk.

Sir George, a red-faced gentleman with a white moustache, who filled in his remarks when at a loss for a word with a swift glance round, as if he were searching for it, and a little grunt to signify that he had found it, explained that they had felt that they must come and see her as soon as possible. Lady Francis added they had been so sorry to hear of the loss she had suffered in her uncle; but they hoped she would find many friends at Wavercombe; Mrs. Derrick of the Mount—they had just been there—had remarked that she looked forward so much to calling in a day or two.

It was very kind of everybody, Miss Fingal answered in the soft clear voice that always struck her hearers pleasantly. Sir George gave a little nod to himself to show that he approved of it.

Wavercombe was a lovely place in summer, they assured her; there were such nice people in the neighbourhood, and many tennis parties. Their daughter had been devoted to tennis before she was married, and quite a champion. Eight years ago she had won a cup at Farnham. Was Miss Fingal a tennis-player?

No, she had never played tennis, she didn't know how.

They were much surprised. Perhaps she preferred croquet? It had come into favour again of late years.

No, she didn't play croquet.

They were rather damped and paused for a minute. Then Sir George made an attempt. Did she remember how angry her uncle had been when the boys stole his apples? He had put up a great deal of barbed wire to

keep them out. Lady Francis added quickly that it had amused Sir George, for Mr. Fingal was so very angry; Sir George gave a low growling laugh to illustrate how much he had been amused.

They changed the subject. Was she going to stay over Christmas? There was generally some carol-singing in the church on Boxing Day afternoon. If she went to it she must come to tea afterwards at the Tower House; the church was on the way to it.

No, she wasn't going to stay over Christmas, but they were very kind to ask her.

They were sorry. They made a point of going themselves, for Mr. Randall, the vicar, was a great friend. Had she seen him? He was such a good man, so devoted to his sister, who was a cripple, owing to a severe fall she had a good many years ago. She didn't live here but in Chiswick, quite near London. They went to see her sometimes when they went up in the spring; it pleased her so, poor thing. She knew nine different games of patience. Did Miss Fingal play patience? It was an excellent resource when you were alone.

No, Miss Fingal had never played patience, but she was very sorry for the vicar's sister. She looked a little vague as she said it, and after a few more remarks they rose to go.

Lady Francis considerably said that she believed Miss Fingal hadn't anything to drive, and she mustn't think of coming till the weather was better, for it was some distance—a mile and a half beyond the station, and, Sir George added, “a bad road too.”

Miss Fingal said it was very thoughtful of them, and if she might, she would return their visit next time she came, for she didn't think she was going to stay long now.

They agreed with alacrity and departed. Sir George gave a grunt as they moved on in their comfortable car. “Fingal ought to have found a prettier woman to spend his money,” he said. “She looks as if she might hoard it. We must put Randall up to getting something out of her.”

Miss Fingal went for a walk to forget them, and wondered if any one else would come.

One or two more did, chiefly out of curiosity, and because her fortune had been exaggerated, and the acquaintance of an heiress and a fairly young one was an excitement not to be forgone.

Mrs. Derrick appeared a day or two later, in a white motor-car, and brought a nephew with her. She was tall and slightly deaf, with square shoulders on which a sable cape rested, well open in front to show some beautiful old lace, folded across her wide flat chest. She evidently thought herself of some importance, and that it gave her a right occasionally to be rude. She looked at Miss Fingal quickly and critically through her lorgnettes, before she stated that she had come a long way and was very cold. The nephew, Cyril Batson, was a pale-faced young man who looked rather bored and a little ashamed, as if he felt that, being impecunious, he had been brought on approbation to the heiress. Luckily, his aunt did most of the talking. She ignored the late John Fingal, and spoke of the roses and the lupins in the cottage garden in Lady Hester Markham's time—Lady Hester had been a great friend of hers. It was such a pity she lived abroad, but she had been disappointed in Linda's marriage—Mr. Alliston was a curious man, he had been meant for diplomacy but disliked it—she ought to have married her cousin, Lord Stockton, who was said to be fond of her, for she was very pretty and had charming manners.

"Delightful," chipped in the nephew, "and so clever"; whereupon his aunt turned upon him in a hawk-like manner.

"You liked her, Cyril, because she listened to your poems." And then remembering the object she had in view, she explained to Miss Fingal, with unconscious contempt, that her nephew was a poet not yet appreciated, but, no doubt, he would be famous in time—"When he's dead, perhaps," she added with a snap.

"Oh, I hope not—" Miss Fingal stopped in dismay, not knowing how to extricate herself.

"But I should like it," Mr. Batson said in a plaintive

voice. "To be remembered—memory is such a wonderful thing, one of the greatest gifts to poor humanity—hasn't that often occurred to you, Miss Fingal?"

"No, it never did," she told him.

"It's a path backwards."

"But sometimes it would make one very unhappy to turn backwards."

"I wouldn't be without my unhappiness for the world, any more than I would without the thunder showers of summer or the storms of winter," he answered.

"He only talks like a poet occasionally," his aunt said with a gleam of good-nature, "he's generally quite sensible. I suppose you are going to build a garage, Miss Fingal? You'll find it impossible to do without a car here. You'll find it very lonely if you can't go and see your neighbours."

"But I'm used to being lonely. Till uncle John died I lived alone in a flat at Battersea—for eight years."

"Eight years," repeated Mr. Batson, "how beautiful! It gave you so much time to think."

"I didn't think very much," she answered vaguely.

"You are very wonderful," he turned two large brown eyes on her, but without effect, "so self-abasing—it is a sign of greatness."

His aunt made a little impatient sign and got up to go. "Cyril always says things that sound well but have no sense in them," she said. "I am going to Rome next week, but I shall come and see you in London on my return." She pulled the sable cape over her chest with an unctuous air of satisfaction at having done what was expected of her and a contemptuous conviction that the heiress was rather a fool.

Miss Fingal, following her into the hall, saw that the white car was lined with vivid red leather.

"Isn't it strange," Mr. Batson said, hesitating on the doorstep, "how poor material things can make a jumble in one's mind of comedy with tragedy, the sublime and the ridiculous—a red-and-white motor-car? It makes one think of Swinburne's wonderful line—

"'And where the red was, lo the bloodless white.'"

"I never read it," she said.

"How much you have before you," he sighed, with soft envy in his tone, and departed with an air of regret.

There were two white cards on the side-table in the hall. "Dr. and Mrs. Marriot left them, miss," Stimson explained. "They wouldn't come in as Mrs. Derrick was here. They live just below the pond at the white house with the green fence. They asked if you would be here next week, as they're going to have a drawing-room meeting."

She sat down by the fire in the hall when Stimson had vanished. A meeting! The very sound of it frightened her. She felt that she could be happy at Wavercombe if people would only leave her alone, for she liked the cottage and all the things in it. . . . She wondered what the Allistons looked like. Mrs. Webb had not told her that, only that they were young and happy and loved each other. . . . She looked round the little square hall—if only there had been no people who thought they ought to come and see her! She put her hands together with a movement of despair. . . . It was growing dark. The servants were shut off from the hall by a baize-covered door; there was no sound at all. . . . An idea occurred to her. She went softly upstairs, and stole down again in a close-fitting hat and a wrap, and out of the house, closing the door and lifting the latch of the gate carefully so that there might be no click of lock or latch to betray her. She longed, just for half an hour perhaps, to get away from humanity. With noiseless steps she sped from the cottage—past the green—beside the pond—and on—and on, while the shadows deepened—till she came to the high wall that shut in Beechwood. How thankful she was that the Gilstons were away. She looked at one of the seats for wayfarers and hesitated, as if considering whether she would sit there, then remembered that builders had put up the wall. She imagined the men laying the bricks, with the mortar between, and the wall growing higher and higher—it couldn't have been very long ago from the look of it—and when it was

done the iron seat had been placed beneath it for tired passers-by. Was Miss Fingal growing imaginative? She turned away; she didn't want to sit down and be reminded of the doings of men, or to go farther on towards the homes of people like those who had been to see her. She hurried back till she reached the clump of trees at the end of the pond. There, among them, was a wooden seat with initials cut by the penknives of foolish people—she had rested on it two or three days in the dusk of the evening,—she went to it and felt the darkness gather closer and closer round her. A clock struck, she heard it faintly; it must be the church clock, she thought, the church of which Mr. Randall, who was such a good man to his crippled sister, was the vicar. She hoped he wouldn't come and call; she wanted to be let alone and not obliged to talk to people she didn't understand.

There were footsteps among the trees. She could dimly see a man and woman near the pond; but she was completely hidden, and they stood with their backs to her. They were silent for a minute, then she heard a man's eager young voice—

"Look here, Annie, I didn't mean it. You know I'm awfully gone on you—why, I'd jest do anything."

"Well, you shouldn't have said what you did," the woman answered. The voice was young too, and very fresh. "I don't believe you care, and we'd better come to the end of it."

"Come to the end of it!" He was husky with emotion. "Why, it would be the death of me, and as for caring—I should think you know about that. I'd sooner chuck myself into that bit of water than give you up."

"Well, but look here——"

"Yes, but look here—you don't mean it either, do you?—I mean that you want to end it—if you do I'll know what to do."

She hesitated a moment before she answered. "No, I don't, Alfie dear," and there was silence.

The listener knew that he had taken the girl in his arms and was kissing her.

"There, that's it," he said when the long embrace was over, "and we'll get married as soon as we can—then there won't be any more mistakes."

There was a little cooing sound of assent. "But I must go," she said, "or they'll wonder where I've got to." They went along the road together.

Miss Fingal turned, and resting her arms on the back of the seat put her head down on them. "I couldn't feel like that—I couldn't. I'm not alive—I can't be alive. I must pray to something—to God—to Christ. Let me be alive—alive—different from now. I don't feel enough or live enough."

Mr. Randall called the next day—it was a Thursday. He was a large well-conditioned vicar of forty-five, with a steady gaze, a slightly superior smile that gave him an air of authority, and an effective middle tone in his voice. He told her how much he had esteemed her uncle, who at one time rented the vicarage every year (which, of course, she knew), while he, the vicar, went for his annual holiday—to Wales, he added, as if he thought the detail would interest her, that he had always liked the Welsh: they were untruthful, fond of money, and not very clean, but a most worthy set of people.

She said, "Yes?" and waited.

"One year," he continued, "I tried staying in London, or rather in Chiswick, where I have a sister, a dear exemplary woman, much afflicted, and most patient; but I found that the air didn't rest me as that of Wales did."

She had heard of his sister from Lady Francis.

"Ah, yes, Sir George and Lady Francis—most kind people, anxious to do what they can; but they have many calls upon them. With your uncle it was different, of course, he was a bachelor—all his life a bachelor. The poor of Wavercombe have missed him; luckily there are not very many, but still there are cottages with old, very old people in them, needing coal and other comforts at this season of the year. He was mindful of them; no doubt he realised that it was a blessed thing to help them."

"It was very kind of him," she said.

Mr. Randall paused a moment, then went bravely on. "Both in winter and summer the local interests have cause to regret Mr. Fingal. If he was not a very generous man, he was always sensible of what might be called legitimate claims upon him." He paused again, and, without removing his gaze from her, he remarked that the rich had great privileges, very great privileges and opportunities.

"How much did uncle John give you at Christmas?" she asked quite simply, and took her cheque-book from a despatch-box on the bookcase. "I should like to give you twice as much, and I will always send it if I am not here. Please let the poor people have a great deal of coal, they will get ill if they're not warm."

He went away, surprised and very satisfied. A curious woman, and unfathomable, he thought, but it was possible that she might prove a benefactress to the district.

Miss Fingal stood at the window and watched his back disappear in the distance, then she sat down by the fire and, drawing the easy-chair a little nearer to it, reached out for a novel.

"Stimson," she said—he had lingered in the hall—"would you come in? We will go back to London to-morrow. Please order a fly for the two o'clock train."

"Isn't it rather a pity, miss?" he asked with mild surprise. "Webb has been wanting to see you about the garden ever since he came home last night; but for the rain he was going to ask if you would go round it with him this morning."

"I will see him to-morrow. There will be plenty of time. We shall be here till the early afternoon." She opened her book.

"Yes, miss, or there's the five o'clock express."

"That will be better," she answered, as if to show that she was amenable to reason.

He made another effort. "There's the meeting at Dr. Marriot's next week, miss. He seems very anxious you should be there."

"I'm sorry." She went on with her book. There was nothing more to be done.

"I can't make her out sometimes," he told Mrs. Webb. "She has a way of her own, though at first you think she's yielding in everything. I shouldn't wonder if some day she wakes up and surprises us."

Miss Fingal saw Webb in the morning, and, having listened to his suggestions for the garden, gave him leave to spend all he asked, more if he wished, for improvements and additions. He never guessed how little she knew of his craft. "She seemed anxious that everything should be done that Miss Linda had wanted," he said afterwards—"the new borders and mixed flower-beds, and the flagged pathway going to the orchard, and yet she doesn't seem to take much interest in it for herself."

And that was what Miss Fingal felt, that she was doing it for some one else, some one she never attempted to define. She sat by the fire again after luncheon, trying to finish her book before it was time to go. The luggage had gone already by an earlier train with Stimson, who wanted to be in London to receive her when she arrived. The Webbs and Emma had been thanked and generously Christmas-boxed; there was nothing more to be done. She looked at the little inlaid clock over the fireplace—half-past three. Mrs. Webb had stated that at four o'clock she would send in "an early cup of tea before you start, miss." Miss Fingal had learnt that she was always to expect early tea from a faithful servant.

It had been a strange little visit, this first one, to the cottage from which she was hurrying away. But loneliness was her natural condition. In Battersea she had had no visitors, not one in all the years—the long silent years that in a measure had paralysed her and made human intercourse a difficult art. Perhaps in time it would be easier, but now she resented everything that filled the peaceful blankness that usually stretched out before her.

X.

A WINDY rainy autumn subsided into a mild winter with sunshine and soft warm days, so that people who had spent their money on going to Italy and Egypt felt that they might as well have stayed at home. Sir James felt it at Montreux; a fortnight after the new year had set in, the morning papers announced that Sir James and Lady Gilston had arrived in London for the season. He always saw to it that there was an occasional paragraph concerning him—even if it meant a guinea he considered it well spent, though since he had become a generous subscriber to various charities, and there was some talk of his going into Parliament, he was generally given a free advertisement.

He went to see Miss Fingal soon after his return. "Sorry to have missed you at Wavercombe," he said, "so was Lady Gilston. She is going to call on you in a day or two." He always spoke of it as a treat in store.

"It is very kind of her," his ward answered as usual.

"Not at all. She will be very glad to do it, I am sure. Well, now, has Jimmy been to see you?"

"No. I dare say he hasn't had time."

"He'll come. He liked you. Told me so, but he's shy."

"I didn't think he was shy."

Something in her voice made him look at her. "He is, I assure you. I say, you look better than you did. I thought you were a delicate girl at first."

"Oh, but I'm not. I have never really been ill in my life."

"Excellent, and you've quite a colour now, eyes

brighter, voice with more chirp in it. Wavercombe has done you good. Has Bertha been—Jimmy's sister, I mean? You knew I'd been married twice—Jimmy and Bertha are the first batch. They're not at home. Children never want a stepmother; stepmother doesn't want them—the odd thing is they don't want to be together either. Very fond of each other, but don't want to be together. Jimmy has two rooms in a little street off the Strand; Bertha has a little flat just off Sloane Square—all sorts of gimcracks in it, a little hole with a skylight that she calls a studio. They talk of going for a run abroad next month."

"Where will they go?" she asked. Places were beginning to interest her. In the future she knew that her feet would tread them.

"I don't know, but just where they like. Bertha thinks she picks up ideas abroad. I don't know what she wants ideas for; doesn't tell me and I don't ask questions—young people won't stand it nowadays. She wanted to give up her flat and have one in Paris instead, but I disapproved of that, put my foot down a little heavily. She said she wanted to study art at somebody's studio; all nonsense, you know." He laughed pleasantly. "What does she want with art? She couldn't do any good with it—only waste of money." He pulled out his large gold watch. "Getting late. I must be off. Good-bye."

He hurried away, the habits of long business years clung to him. "She's better-looking than she was and not at all a bad sort," he thought. "If Jimmy married her he need never do a day's work as long as he lived. He's not a chap likely to fall in love, or make a fool of himself in that way; so perhaps he'll see the wisdom of settling down with a wife who'd give him every sort of comfort and never be a worry."

But Jimmy laughed at the idea, which was put to him quite bluntly. "No, thank you, pater. I don't see myself living in Bedford Square with John Fingal's heiress. I felt sorry for her at the Bendish dinner. She looked such an unconsidered little stick-in-the-mud—wanted waking up."

"Go and see her. She's improving—in looks, I mean. Take her out—I'll stand the racket. Ask her to marry you and she'll wake up."

"I'll go and see her, if you like, and don't mind taking her out, but I draw the line at the rest."

"Well, do it handsomely and you shall have a cheque for your trip abroad next month."

"Done with you," said Jimmy, and went on his way.

Sir James considered it a beginning, and told his wife that she ought to call and make herself agreeable to Miss Fingal. "I think we might invite her to dine—look civil, you know," he suggested.

Lady Gilston reflected for a moment. "But why should we?" she asked. "She doesn't entertain; you say she's not attractive—Sir George Francis said she was plain and had nothing to say—and she is no one in particular."

"She's rich."

"There are heaps of unattractive rich people in London who can be useful to us in many ways; why burden me with a new acquaintance who is useless?"

"Well—but—you know, I've been thinking it would be such an excellent thing if she married Jimmy."

"She won't—and, if she would, he wouldn't."

"We shall have to know her at Wavercombe."

"That won't matter; we can ask her to the garden party, and when Dorothy and Winifred come back they can go and see her. But stray colourless women in London are a bore; I think one should have courage not to know the people one doesn't want."

Nevertheless Lady Gilston called the next day, chiefly because she happened to be in Great Russell Street in the afternoon, and remembered that Bedford Square was quite near. Besides, she reflected that since Miss Fingal would be a neighbour at Wavercombe it might look rude not to have made some sign to her in London.

She was a tall thin woman, worn and tired-looking, with a graceful carriage and a firm, not unpleasant voice. People who met them for the first time wondered how she had come to marry Sir James. She had done it simply for his money. At thirty she had found

herself desperately poor and embarrassed; she had never lived without comfort, and luxuries—provided by other people—and she was determined always to have them. She was not attractive in the usual sense; an unsatisfactory love affair, or rather marriage scheme, and constant worries in her family had hardened as well as embittered her. In a dogged frame of mind, feeling that nothing mattered except the material things of life, she met Sir James Gilston—good-humoured, more vulgar than now, and boastfully rich. He was a widower with two children, but they were little and she did not see them. Bertha was with country relations and going later to a school in Brussels, Jimmy already at a preparatory one in Yorkshire. “They won’t bother you much,” he assured her, “and you shall have things all your own way.” He had already given up the house on Clapham Common in order to take a large corner one in Portland Place. He saw an advertisement of Beechwood at Wavercombe, and persuaded her to go with him to see it: it comprised many acres, a wood, and a little farm, as well as what he called “a real mansion—a country-seat, you know.” She liked it. “I’ll buy it, if you’ll marry me,” he said, “and you shall alter the fittings as much as you please—what do you say?”

She felt that she could bear anything if she had money. They got on very well; she despised him, but pleasantly; she was tolerant and never unkind to his children, though she was not always able to hide her impatience to get them out of her way. In time she had two of her own and cared a good deal for them; she would have cared more if they had not looked so much like their father. They were nearly grown up now, but still at a school in Lausanne kept by her own former governess. She had been a little hampered by her well-bred poor relations (she had come of a spendthrift family), but she had helped them, and made her husband feel that it was a sign of his own uplifting that she did it with his money. Luckily the relations had, in a leisurely fashion, betaken themselves to a better world or adjusted their affairs in other ways. Bertha

and Jimmy as they grew up struck out for themselves, and except for an occasional visit troubled her little. When they came to Beechwood or Portland Place she recognised their right to the shelter of the paternal roof, and was relieved that they did not seek it very often. Her cousin, Lady Hester Markham, had sniffed at them—this was years ago—and found herself snubbed. "They are good-natured creatures," she was told, "better than we are in many ways," and she was advised to accept Jimmy's suggestion that the cottage she had just taken and partly rebuilt (Sir James helped her to do it) should be called Briarpatch. It was done,—a trivial instance of how Lady Gilston's quiet insistence generally carried the day—in small things as well as large. Jimmy did badly both at school and at Oxford; his father had been angry, but she consoled him by saying that it frequently happened in the most aristocratic families. When he wanted to set up rooms in London she agreed that he ought to have them and helped him to find them. She suspected him of spending more money than was good for him, but she and her children were protected by excellent settlements, and, after all, she thought, what would a few thousands matter?

Then there was Bertha. When she reached her twenty-second birthday she resented being left at home without resources, while her stepmother went out with her father; but it opened a door of escape. She explained that she wanted to be on her own; she had an idea that she could paint, perhaps write—anyway do something; heaps of girls did and made their own friends. Lady Gilston told Sir James that it was quite a usual thing now to let them have a little bachelor flat and an allowance; eventually Bertha had both. Thus, Beechwood and the house in London were ready for the school-girls at Lausanne when they came back, and their mother was calmly content at knowing that they would not have to struggle with insufficient means such as had beset her own early years. She had never regretted her marriage, it had given her affluence and peace; but she was a tired woman, tired with the

remembrance of family bickerings and mortifications, and by a sense of disappointment that life had not proved to be a better and more desirable condition than she had found it.

She was bored by her husband's insistence that she should show some civility to Miss Fingal, and his remark that it would be a good thing if she married Jimmy was absurd; still, one never knew; it would be such an excellent thing for Jimmy—she determined to go and see the heiress.

When she did she found a somewhat speechless young woman who was not at all likely to attract, or to be attracted by, her stepson. Still, it was a relief to realise that she was not likely to make any social demands on her time. "And she won't do Wavercombe any harm," she thought. "I wish I had managed her uncle better, but he was tiresome and I never dreamt that he was so rich. She has a well-bred air, and she will probably keep a car; she can take Dorothy and Winifred about sometimes when they come back."

"I hoped to come and see you before," she explained, "but there is always so much to do in London—and I dare say you have too many visitors already," she added politely.

"Oh no, I hardly know any one."

"You must find it dull?"

"No—I'm used to being alone."

"Yes—" and there was a pause.

Mercifully, Stimson entered with a lamp; then tea appeared, on a large silver tray with handles, good old-fashioned china cups with rat-tail spoons and a silver jug and sugar-basin to match—a trivial memorial to the high respectability of the dead, just as the dainty service at Briarpatch had been one to the charm of the living. The food looked dull, but Lady Gilston brightened up a little as she doubled over one of the large thin slices of bread-and-butter and realised that the outside of her cup was quite hot.

"I hope you had some pleasant callers at Wavercombe?" she asked.

"Sir George and Lady Francis came——"

"Oh yes, very worthy, and so uninteresting," with a little cynical laugh.

"And Mrs. Derrick."

"Did she bring her ridiculous nephew?"

At which Miss Fingal looked up with a light in her eyes that made Lady Gilston almost like her. "He was rather amusing, and his aunt's manner wasn't very kind."

"I always thought him most tiresome, but it's nice of you to put it in that way. I dislike literary people myself, especially poets—they take themselves so seriously. Richard Alliston used to invite them to the cottage at one time, but he was bored with them. Shall you go there again at Easter?"

"I don't know yet—there are so many places to see," Miss Fingal answered, with a suggestion of vision in her voice; for Wavercombe, though it was such a little way from London, had given her an increased sense of the extending world and the ease with which distances were reached. The idea was taking hold of her that she would go away again, and soon, but not to Briarpatch, though in the future she knew that much of her time would be spent there. She wanted to see other places, and without servants—from whom it was as impossible to escape at the cottage as in Bedford Square; to be entirely unknown again, unheard of, so that no one would have an idea that she ought to be visited. In some queer way that was her own, she felt it would help her to realise the possibilities that money had brought her, and strengthen her for the world she had to live in.

"You want a more lively place," Lady Gilston said, with kindly contempt for Wavercombe in her voice, and relief at the prospect of not having the heiress on her mind at Easter.

"Oh no, not at first. I think I should like to go somewhere that is very quiet. I am so accustomed to—stillness." She hesitated over the last word, but another one did not suggest itself.

"It sounds like a remark the dead might make," Lady Gilston said it with a little shiver. Her eyes rested

on the tall white vases against the dark wall of the further room. They looked ghostly in the waning light—just as they did to their owner. "Where would you go?"

"I don't know. I have been about so little." Miss Fingal looked up with a smile that was half apologetic.

"I went to Leesbury the other day—a few miles from Great Missenden. It's a very small place. I think you would find that still enough—no one lives there yet, though there are golf links near, and they have found out lately that the air is very good. So I dare say it will grow. There's a little hotel, the 'White Hart.' I'm told it's excellent."

"Did you stay there?"

"Oh no, I only went for a few hours to see my cousin, Linda Alliston—your cottage at Wavercombe belonged to her before your uncle bought it."

Miss Fingal leant forward, and the expression on her face became almost eager.

"I heard about her, and I thought of her a great deal while I was at the cottage."

"She married a man who behaved disgracefully—it's extraordinary how many men behave badly to women, isn't it?"

"Is it? I haven't known any."

"Linda divorced her husband, of course," Lady Gilston went on. "He left her before the second child was born—it's only eighteen months old now. She might have married much better. Her cousin, Lord Stockton, was fond of her at one time, a clever man and very rich."

"But money doesn't always make people happy."

"Being without it is very inconvenient," Lady Gilston answered with a little snappy laugh. "I never could understand what women saw in Richard Alliston myself; he ruined Linda's life." She pulled her fur round her, as if preparing to go.

Miss Fingal hardly noticed it; she was thinking of the orchard, and the garden, of all that was being done to it. Webb had written that morning telling her what he was doing. For a moment she imagined the two

who used to walk about under the apple-trees. "Her friends must be very sorry for her," she said absently.

"She hasn't many friends now," Lady Gilston answered, "or none who will do anything for her, so that she's on my mind a good deal. She's not a near relation," she added. "Her mother was my cousin, but she is abroad, which is very tiresome of her, for Linda was never very strong and now she's really ill. If she doesn't take care—" she gave a little shrug.

"If I went there—perhaps I might go and see her?" It was a strange suggestion to come from the woman who longed to be alone.

Lady Gilston jumped at it. "How very kind of you to think of it—the air would do you good."

"Is she at the White Hart?"

"Oh no, she's at Highbrook Farm, about a mile off. I wish you would go."

"I'm not sure that I can—" Miss Fingal said with mild indecision.

"I hope you will," came the firm answer; and then in a more genial tone, "it would be too delightful of you. Good-bye. I'm so glad to have seen you." Lady Gilston felt quite pleased with herself as she whizzed along Bedford Square. "She might take a fancy to her," she thought. "She has plenty of money and she doesn't know what to do with it."

The lonely woman sat by the dull red fire with her hands folded, but a dim vista had opened before her. Stimson brought in another old-fashioned lamp, for no electricity had penetrated into that sedate house. Uncle John had hated workmen; lamps had served his family, and served him to the end. She looked up at the bare room, at the long bookcase, and the satinwood piano, and the two alabaster vases—"It sounds like a remark the dead might make." There came back to her the shivery laugh with which her visitor had said it. "I think she is quite right," she thought. "If I don't take care I shall slip in among them without being dead."

She turned to the fire again, lulled and half dazed by her thoughts. Leesbury! a place where there were no people to call, a little hotel, and in the background

Highbrook Farm and Linda Alliston. She dreamt of it all that night. And in the morning, just as if the realities had known, the dream began to come true.

After breakfast, Mrs. Turner came to take the simple orders for the day. When they were over, she generally disappeared, but this morning she lingered.

"January is getting on, miss, and the spring will be on us before we know where we are," she said. "You see it's so fine, just as if it was hurrying."

"Yes?"

"If you thought of going away any time, miss, perhaps you would let us know."

"Yes, I will tell you. I have not made up my mind yet," Miss Fingal answered with the shy dignity that always forbade much questioning.

It made Mrs. Turner apologetic. "It was only that Stimson and I were saying there were things that want doing to the house," she explained. "Mr. Fingal talked last year of having our rooms upstairs painted and done up for us; and then there's the basement. And the outside of the house does look shabby. It's peeling off. But if you were at home you mightn't like the smell of paint, it makes some people ill."

Miss Fingal looked up quickly. "It's very kind of you to think of it——"

"Perhaps you don't want anything done this year, miss?" Mrs. Turner said with tactful deference.

"Oh yes, I do, and I should like to go away—it would be better; when do you want to begin?"

"Well, miss, just when you like. You know what workmen are, once they are in, and when they're gone there'll be spring cleaning."

"You had better tell them to come at once."

Mrs. Turner had never seen any one take things so easily. It gave her courage. "Did you ever think of having electric light put in, miss?" she asked. "It wouldn't be much trouble when workmen are about—the wires are outside; and it would make all the difference, especially on the stairs and in that big drawing-room. Stimson and I often wonder how you can sit there alone these dark evenings?"

"Yes. I will ask Mr. Bendish about it," and Mrs. Turner was gently dismissed.

A day-dream began in that next half-hour. The darkness and greyness and shadows receded before it. She felt as if she had been journeying through them towards the dawn . . . and she was mounting a watch-tower to see what might be coming towards her in the morning light—the light of electricity—how absurd it was! But silently and alone, through the long dreary hours of that first winter, in the house uncle John had left her, she had gone through a world of dull, unidentified suffering, of vague fear and shrinking; and now, suddenly, in a prosaic material way her surroundings were going to be changed. She went over to the big writing-table and sat down and wrote two letters, one to Mr. Bendish asking if he would come and see her, and the other to the White Hart Hotel at Leesbury, saying that she would like to go there at once and stay for a time, if she could have two front rooms. "I should like to see the road and all the things that go by," she thought, "for the world is so interesting to look at."

"Excellent idea," Mr. Bendish said when he heard of the scheme. "By all means put light everywhere, and while you are about it tear down that dark faded old paper on the staircase and hang up something more cheerful. I wonder you don't have the whole place done up. My wife said she suggested it, but you didn't seem to like disturbing things."

"I will now," she answered.

The next day she had a letter from the White Hart saying that the sitting-room and bedroom on the first floor, both at the front looking out on the common, were reserved for her.

XI.

THE White Hart was an old-fashioned country inn that, because of some modern improvements, called itself an hotel. The wainscoted rooms remained, but over their native brown they had been painted white, and the old stairway twisting about the house that had once been two houses, as if to see all that had been done as a concession to the new world. Miss Fingal's rooms looked on to the untidy main road that straggled here and there towards a little bit of common opposite; it reminded her of the green at Wavercombe, though it had a less sophisticated air than that occasionally swept and garnished space. Well beyond the common, on the skyline to the right, were a few half-built villas, a hint of the days to come. In the middle background on the left were some woods and undulating ground that rose and fell and stretched away into the natural characteristics of the place. Few things passed by the hotel—except for its links Leesbury had not been found out,—farm-carts creaked by occasionally, sometimes a motor whizzed, or a tradesman's cart stopped while its driver refreshed himself on his way to customers, farmers mostly, farther off. The station was round a corner fifty yards behind the hotel; the golfers arrived with their bags, caddies awaited them, and went across the common to the links that were evidently beyond the villas that were being built, a mile or so away: it was in that direction that the modern fiend would creep in on Leesbury. Miss Fingal watched them all with interest from the window of her sitting-room. She felt happier in this cheerful lodging than in the drawing-room at Bedford Square, or even at the cottage. It held no memories, for her

at any rate, of people who had died or whose joyful-togetherness had come to an end; she was virtually alone in an unexplored country, as she had been at Battersea.

And three good days went by.

She had not been to Highbrook Farm yet, though it was always in her mind—she was waiting for some indefinite bidding that would give her courage: the bidding that all of us have known in different ways at some time. It came on the fourth afternoon of her visit, a sunny day with little sounds in the air that told of nature's satisfaction. The wooden clock on the mantelpiece struck half-past two. She remembered how soon the light would fail, though the days were beginning to lengthen. Then suddenly she felt that it would be impossible to walk, that her courage might fail, that perhaps at the last she would turn back; but it would take so little time to drive and she would be there before the excitement of starting had ended. Lady Gilston had said it was only a mile off. She rang and ordered the inn fly—the one drivable thing to be had.

She heard the creaking of the harness as the fly came up to the door, and looking out, saw with satisfaction that it was open. A thin old man sat up on the box, holding the reins with the air of one who had driven better beasts in his time, but was resigned to his fate. The ostler, a little short man in corduroys, who always hung about the front of the house just under the sign-post—which had a cracked faded white hart painted on it—was holding the patient head of the bony old horse.

The way for half a mile lay along the main road, then turned off on the left to a narrower one that wound beneath overhanging elms and oaks; through their brown arms the winter sunlight fell upon her till, a hundred yards down, they retreated and showed a row of ten dilapidated cottages, with little wooden-fenced forecourts and thatched roofs. A stone tablet on the fifth cottage gave the year in which they were built, more than a century ago. To the small casement windows old women came at sound of the fly wheels, or stood

in the doorways looking out at the passing stranger, shading their dim eyes with wrinkled hands.

"Are those almshouses?" Miss Fingal asked the driver.

"Yes, ma'am, that's what they are. There's been talk of pulling them down, but I don't expect they'll do it till those who are in them now are gone." He looked back at her while he spoke.

A shadow passed over her face. "They look very old," she said.

He nodded. "Stood there these hundred and fifty years and more. They belong to the parish, but there isn't many people in it, and they are scattered about, so there hasn't been much doing up." He flicked his whip, and they went on for a bit. Then he turned and looked at his fare again. "I expect you're going to see Mrs. Alliston at the farm, ma'am?"

"Yes, I'm going to see her." Miss Fingal was surprised; but, of course, everything a stranger did in so small a place was known or guessed.

"When Mr. Alliston used to come to Leesbury he talked of having those cottages done up himself—but nothing came of it." The old man flicked his whip again and the horse had another spasm of quickened pace. A whiff of violet breath stole up to her. The roots had been sheltered by the hedges on either side; thrushes and blackbirds, with a cheerful note, as if they recognised that the worst of winter might be gone already, rose from them and greeted her, and made more definite the feeling of exaltation—the joy of earth reaching out and appealing to her too.

Less than a quarter of a mile farther, round a curve, and towards the inwardness of the landscape, they came upon some tarred outbuildings and weather-beaten haystacks; in a siding at the top of the road a couple of farm-carts rested on their shafts; and a long, small-windowed, whitewashed house was to be seen set back some little way and approached through a decaying wooden gate with a stiff-sounding latch and a clanging when it swung back on its rusty hinges. A boy opened the gate; they went up the gravelled drive and stopped

before a porch that had seats at either side and an old-fashioned bell with an iron pull to it. A long wait, then the heavy door was opened by a buxom woman, who seemed to speak to the door or, perhaps, to some one behind it, before she attended to the visitor. "It's no business to be kept shut," she said, "on a bright day like this. We want air in the place, I'm sure."

Miss Fingal's heart beat quickly as she asked for Mrs. Alliston.

"Yes, ma'am, Mrs. Alliston's here; wait a bit and I'll tell the nurse." She went to the foot of the stairs, which were covered with red drugget and had very bright rods to them; they suggested that Highbrook Farm had an eye to lodgers. "Janet, are you there?" she called upwards. "Here's a lady to see Mrs. Alliston."

A pleasant-faced Scotch girl with copper-coloured hair appeared. She looked like a marigold in an old garden. "Mrs. Alliston's at home," she said, "but I don't know whether she'll see you——"

"Lady Gilston thought I might come and see her," the gentle voice answered.

"Oh, if it's a friend of Lady Gilston you are," without much cordiality, "you'd better come up." With something akin to reluctance she led the way to a room on the first floor at the other side of the house. "I'll tell her," she said, and disappeared.

Miss Fingal waited, standing in the middle of the room, her heart beating, her courage ebbing. A cottage piano, which did not seem to belong to the rest of the furniture, was open—a Chopin polonaise on its music-stand; a box of books from a library was by a round table, that had been pushed probably from the centre to one side; in a corner, on a chair at the end of the old-fashioned sofa, some crochet antimacassars were heaped as if they had been collected; facing the doorway was a mullioned casement window, with a deep sill inside, and close to it was a wicker chair with untidy cushions, as if some one had been sitting there to look out at the garden below.

The garden, for she was near enough to the window to see it, had an old-world look, a Dutch pathway going up

it, a privet hedge at the end with a gate in the centre. Beside the gate was a lilac bush, brown and bare like most of the vegetation; it was all waiting. A little way beyond was a small plantation; the brown branches were so dense and close that they half hid the outbuildings and wooded distances.

A door at the other side of the room was opened and a slight figure—a girl, for she might still be called one—stood hesitating.

“Yes?” she said questioningly.

“I have come—because——”

“They only said a lady.” She came forward, her utterance was quick and the voice very clear and sweet: it could so evidently be tender. “They didn’t tell me your name?”

“I am called Aline Fingal. Lady Gilston thought I might come—I hope you don’t mind.”

Mrs. Alliston held out her hand. “It’s nice of you. I had forgotten, and wondered who it could be. Do sit down—near the fire. I know about you now, you are staying at the White Hart.” She indicated a place on the sofa; but she was embarrassed by her visitor’s nervousness, and for a moment they were silent.

Then Miss Fingal gathered courage and looked at her. She was very pale, with a quantity of softly-twisted hair that had here and there a streak of gold, or shaded to darkness. But the dominant thing about her was the tragedy her face betrayed—a remembrance of happiness, a capacity for joy that had been buried in an agony she had struggled with till she had come through, accepting and desperately holding on to all that was left her, bringing with her the radiance that still lingered in her smile, and the music in the laughter which seldom came; and both had a quality of sorrow in them that smote any who knew her history. She was obviously weak and ill; she looked as if she were being hunted by death, trying to elude it, and dreading lest it were impossible to escape. There had been caution even in the way she crossed the room. “Cousin Augusta told me that the cottage at Wavercombe belonged to you now, and that perhaps I should see you; but I

understood you were not coming till Easter—if you came at all.”

“I didn’t want to stay in London till then.”

“But why didn’t you go to dear Briarpatch? Wavercombe has such lovely walks, and you can see the Surrey hills—I dream of them sometimes.”

“Lady Gilston said Leesbury was a new place—and you were here—and I wondered if I might come and see you.” Usually, if Miss Fingal said little, she was diffidently self-possessed, but now she could hardly speak, she felt like an intruder in spite of the reassuring words.

“Are you alone at the White Hart?” Linda asked. A searching expression had come to her eyes as if, weary of seeing things that were sad and frightening, they wondered about this stranger and her history.

“Yes—alone.”

“And why have you come to see me?” It was asked very softly—there was no offence in the question. “I am only a tiresome crock now.”

“I thought of you so much at the cottage—and that perhaps you would let me come,” Miss Fingal answered.

“Of course I will let you come, and I shall adore hearing about it,” Linda said quickly. “Don’t apologise for so lovely a kindness.” Her lips and eyes gave out a gay desperate little laugh, as if the buried youth in her remembered its own and rose to gather a vision of it.

Her visitor was startled and thought—“Oh, but she’s beautiful, she’s beautiful,” and aloud she said, “I knew—I felt you had been happy there.”

“Happy—yes, I was dreadfully happy, and then dreadfully miserable.” The last words were said with sudden intensity, they seemed to escape from her. She tried to cover them with a quick question. “Did Mrs. Webb wait on you and was Emma there?”

“Yes, they were both there.”

“Dear fussy Mrs. Webb. Did she talk to you about me?”

“She did when she first took me up to your room—not afterwards.”

“Oh!” This stranger with the little air of remote-

ness and silence, had a delicate soul, Linda thought. "Tell me why you are all alone here? Leesbury is such a quiet place—unless you golf, of course?"

"Oh no, I don't golf—and I am always alone." It was so natural a condition to her that she was almost surprised at the question.

"Even when you are not at the 'White Hart'?"

"Yes, always." Then hurriedly she asked, "Lady Gilston said you had two children."

"Yes, they are babies still. Would you care to see them?"

"I should like to see them," Miss Fingal answered, constrained by politeness, and awkwardly wondering what she could say to them.

Mrs. Alliston rose suddenly, and stood listening as if to some sound that took no account of her visitor. "I think they are in the garden; they go that way to see the cows milked." She went quickly to the window and pushed it open. The sunlight poured in and filled the room. "Oh no—it's too late, they have gone." She turned away again, but the window remained open.

Miss Fingal gave a sigh of relief. She had escaped an embarrassment she almost dreaded. People were so eager about children, even strange children; but she was half afraid of them, she never knew what to say or do. With an idea that she ought to show some interest in these, she asked the obvious question, "What are their names?"

"The baby is Bridget, and the boy is called Sturdie, after his grandfather." The quick movement had brought on a fit of coughing and a struggle for breath.

"Oh, you are not at all well." Miss Fingal drew back anxiously.

"No, I'm not well, but I mean to get well here." It was said with a note of determination. "Shall you stay long?"

"I don't know," helplessly, "I never know. It's very comfortable, and it's beautiful air." She was just repeating Lady Gilston's remarks, afraid of having to shorten her visit because of the silence she could not help. "I wish you would come and see me one day,"

she added inconsequently, knowing while she said it that it was unlikely.

"I will if I can, but I'm not able to walk much. You must come and see me if you will—you are stronger than I——"

"Oh yes, I'm very strong. I don't think I was ever ill in my life."

"How splendid! You will be able to walk here—there's a short way across the fields, past the back of the almshouses where the old women live. I used to potter in and out of them once. We stayed here before—at this farm—soon after I was married—for a week—and we lunched at the inn on the way to the links." Then, breaking off abruptly, she went on, "Perhaps you will come again in a day or two. I should so like you to see the babies,—no, it isn't a hint to go—do stay—it was only a little outbreak of maternal vanity. Are you fond of children?"

"I don't know any——"

"Oh!" Linda reached out a hand compassionately, for the words and the forlorn voice touched her. Then with a little sound that showed the question had been pent-up in her heart, she said, "But you've told me nothing about the cottage yet. I heard from cousin Augusta that Mr. Fingal had left it to you. I wonder if it has been much altered since we were there?"

"No, it is just the same—it always shall be," Miss Fingal answered, excited by the half-caress.

"How dear of you!" She stopped for a moment, as if amused at her recollections. "You see, Sir James is very kind—so is cousin Augusta, but I'm rather afraid of her. She is a very definite person, I couldn't ask her much," and then suddenly, "Did she tell you about me, that I had divorced my husband?"

"Yes, she told me." And there was a pause. "I suppose you had to do it." Miss Fingal was not sure that she ought to add anything, or that divorce was a subject for discussion.

The clock struck and she rose. "Perhaps I ought to go," she said, longing to stay, for, in spite of the awkwardness, in this farmhouse room, sitting by this

girl who was battling with life and death, she felt like a ship at anchor after long sailing—as if she had been waiting for this meeting, that it belonged to her life, to its history.

And Linda Alliston, too, seemed to divine that the strange silent woman, half-paralysed by her own loneliness, had drifted in upon her for some reason that was presently to be made plain.

"I do so want to know more about you—you live in our cottage, it makes you so interesting, do tell me a little about yourself," she said. "Why are you alone?" She pulled her guest down gently to the sofa again, as if the object of the visit had not yet been accomplished.

Miss Fingal raised her wondering eyes, and Linda, looking into them, felt drawn to her and fascinated. "I haven't any one at all belonging to me," the low voice answered.

"And you have not been married—you are Miss Fingal?"

"Yes, Aline Fingal."

"Aline is such a sweet name—it seems to suit you."

"I wish you would call me by it," in a hushed voice, for it was so much, so daring a thing to ask. "No one in the world does that——"

"Oh, but—I've only just seen you—I should be afraid." She looked at her visitor again and saw entreaty on her face. "You see I am a stranger to you," she added gently, "and yet——" then tentatively, "Shall I?"

"I thought of you so much when I was at Wavercombe, and I have since, that I don't feel as if you are a stranger. You are not one in my thoughts."

"Then I must," half tenderly. "I think it is right; for we are both young and too lonely to be formal, and intimacy isn't made up of many meetings—is it?—but often of some undercurrents that have met and perhaps been seeking each other—in a wilderness, or Heaven knows where—don't you think so?"

"Yes," Miss Fingal answered, not in the least understanding her.

"I have sat here such hours on hours—or with my

arms on that window-ledge," she nodded towards it, "or lying on this old sofa, thinking about life and its mysteries, till sometimes I've felt as if I were getting through—through to the centre of things, just for a moment, then it all eludes me; but I'm talking arrant nonsense, Aline. You must give me my name too, you know, you must call me Linda. Now tell me more about the cottage, and the beloved orchard that I shall never see again. We were going to make a paved pathway to it."

"I know; Webb told me. He is making it now."

"Making it now! Oh, you are a positive darling. Wasn't Mr. John Fingal very fond of you?"

"I don't think he could have been. He was very kind." The remembrance of him sent her back into the old formula. "I hardly ever saw him."

"But what did you do with yourself before he died? Were all your nearer people dead?"

"Oh yes, they died long ago. I lived for eight years alone in a little flat in Battersea."

"You poor solitary mouse. And where do you live now when you're not at Briarpatch?"

"In Bedford Square."

"Of course. He did." She laughed again, the gay little laugh that came from a spring where happiness had dwelt; for she remembered John Fingal with his smooth parted hair and cold manner, she used carefully to hide out of his way when he came to Beechwood. "And what is the house in Bedford Square like?" she asked.

"It is large and very silent. The people who lived in it are dead." She seemed to be there while she spoke. "The furniture is dead and cold too: you can tell that it belonged to the people of long ago."

Linda looked into Aline's grey eyes again, and thought what soft lashes they had for their setting, and she asked, "There are old servants, I suppose?"

"Oh yes, and they are very kind. They have been there for years. But they are downstairs, except when I ring, or when it is time for food to be ready, or the lamp to be carried in—I think they bring it early because there are so many shadows." She stopped for a moment.

"It is all large and silent; I often feel as if I were in an empty house—a sort of caretaker——"

"She is like an empty house herself," Linda thought, "of which her consciousness is the caretaker."

"Or perhaps it knows that it is near the British Museum—all Bloomsbury seems to feel that," Aline went on. "When I lived in Battersea, I used to go sometimes to look up at the old houses in Cheyne Walk. I think they remembered things, and were my friends; but the houses are different in Bloomsbury, more severe and colder, and deadness is everywhere; but they know—everything knows—I can tell it sometimes, not always——"

"Aline!" Linda leant forward. "How strange you are!"

"I didn't mean to say all that," she answered humbly, as if recalled to herself. "The words came away from me—I heard myself saying them." She stopped for a moment. "I think I have been waiting for you," she said, "or looking for you—I felt it just now when you spoke of people not being strangers—for it is easier to say things to you than to any one I ever met."

Linda looked wonderingly at this strange development of her visitor. "It's the inner communications of thought, the ways under our self-consciousness," she said, "we don't know what dwells in them, or comes to them. We know so little—so little," she added passionately. "I never used to understand what Dick meant, all his eagerness and impatience, while I just laughed and stood still and lived in loving him, just loving him—it was enough." Her voice was full of tenderness. "He sent me two lines—that was all—asking me to forgive him; but there wasn't anything to forgive—I want you to understand that, for we are going to know each other, you and I—I feel it—and I want you to know it from me,—he wasn't to blame, my splendid Dick." She got up abruptly as if to end the subject, crossed the room and, stopping by the piano, hesitated, then turned away from it. "Tell me more about yourself," she said; "I should like to know the things you care for. Is music much to you?"

"Yes—I think so; but Chopin is too difficult," Miss Fingal answered diffidently, thrown back on herself by the sudden change of tone. "I couldn't play that polonaise."

"Some one said once—it was one of the new poets, I think—that he was the singer of unending sadness, even in his happiest moods, and that all his music meant farewell." Then in a different voice, "I hired this piano from Great Missenden. It's not up to much, but I like the yellow silk in the front; it's the colour of the sun, I tell myself, on rainy days. . . . And books—do you read much? Here is Browning——"

"He is difficult, too. I never could understand him."

"Dick used to love him so. He's not difficult when you are over five-and-twenty and have felt or dreamt about life . . . or suffered. Pain is such a wonderful teacher; if I had suffered before I knew Dick I should have been better—it came too late." She clasped her hands together on the top of her soft hair. It brought on a fit of coughing that exhausted her. She sat down again and rested her head on the sofa end.

"Oh, you are very ill!" Miss Fingal was alarmed. "You have been talking too much; I ought to have gone before."

"No, I have loved seeing you. You have done me a world of good; but you shall go now; I must lie down—you'll be comfy at the White Hart—they are nice people. I'm so glad you came." She put her feet up on the sofa, resting her head high on the cushion. "Good-bye," she said; "but come again—not to-morrow—I will lie low all day, but the day after. And the children shall be here. I want you to see them." She offered her face to be kissed.

Half-frightened, unbelievably, wondering if she had mistaken the sign, Aline leant forward to her. "No one has kissed me since my father died, nearly ten years ago," she said—"and he very seldom did."

"Oh!" Linda made a sound of sympathy and took her hands and looked at her. "Life will be better for you," she said. "I feel that it will—you are only wait-

ing." She let go the hands. Aline Fingal felt as if just for a moment a light had been thrown across the road in front of her.

She sent the fly away and walked back: she found the path across the fields, by the long narrow gardens at the back of the almshouses, through a copse, and so out to the main road. All the way she had a confused sense that the visit to Highbrook Farm had changed her, that it was the great event of her life—greater even than the coming of uncle John's fortune. She felt bewildered, intoxicated, quickened with happiness that was only subdued and held in check by that last few minutes in which Linda's weakness had been brought home to her; but she had seen so little illness in her life, she did not recognise how serious it was.

"She'll get better," she said to herself, "and be happy again—she must." She remembered the two people she had heard while she sat unseen among the trees at Wavercombe. "Perhaps Linda and Dick will make it up, as they did; unless the divorce makes it impossible. It must be like a high wall between." She thought of the high wall round Beechwood, and imagined herself walking beside it, on to the cottage—the cottage and the high wall round Beechwood—and Linda Alliston at the Farm. Her thoughts seemed to wander about in space to and fro, without any controlling power from her, and to come homing back as birds do that have seen strange places of which they cannot give account.

XII.

THE fly, which had arrived before her, had been closed and was waiting outside the hotel. The door was open, and a woman inside leaning forward to hear what a man standing by it was saying to the driver: the landlord of the hotel and the ostler stood watching and interested. Miss Fingal heard a good-tempered masculine voice say, "It's only a mile, you know. Get there as fast as you can. We shall not stay long."

She stopped and looked at him. It was Jimmy Gilston. He recognised her at once.

"Hullo, Bertha, here is Miss Fingal. How do you do?" he said. "We heard you were here and meant to look you up when we came back from Highbrook Farm. We have only come down for an hour or two, and nearly missed getting this precious fly."

Bertha held out a hand. "I'm awfully glad to see you at last." Her voice was pleasant, but in the waning light it was difficult to see what she was like. "I thought we should come upon you. The driver tells us he took you to see Linda Alliston. How is she?"

"She's very ill—and I fear I stayed too long."

"That's awkward. We are going abroad directly, and want to have a look at her before we start," Jimmy said. "What shall we do?" he asked his sister.

"Let us stay just ten minutes—we had better go at once for it is getting late." The sun had set half an hour before, and the wintry twilight was hurrying. "Perhaps we shall see Miss Fingal when we come back?"

"Oh yes," Miss Fingal said. "Do come and have some tea in my sitting-room?" She nodded to the first floor.

"That's an idea," Jimmy answered. "Three-quarters of an hour, I should say, perhaps less, and we will return quite ready to drink tea and sit over your fire for another three-quarters. I must get back soon."

"Jimmy always seizes an opportunity," Bertha laughed, as he settled down on the seat beside her.

The driver scrambled slowly to his place. The bony horse struggled, started with a jerk, and the fly rattled away along the main road.

Aline Fingal felt as she went up the twisty staircase as if events were marching towards her. A cheerful fire was burning in her room. It looked comfortable and home-like. She ordered tea, "and a good many things with it," she added vaguely, not used to arranging details. While it was being made ready she went to the next room, took off her wraps, and looked at herself in the glass. A light seemed to be shining in the eyes that were usually only soft and vague—or at best inquiring. She put her face nearer to see herself more plainly.

"My hair is almost the same colour as—Linda's, but hers is so lovely," she thought, and turned away. There was another glass, a long one, in the door of the wardrobe. She caught the contour of her figure as she passed, slim and even graceful, but the whole of her looked demure, almost prim, in the plain black dress she still wore for the uncle she had regretfully never been able to mourn. She stopped and considered for a moment. There was a short chinchilla stole in her trunk; when she bought it she had realised, though it hadn't mattered to her then, that it was becoming. She put it on her shoulders—the coldness of the evening served as an excuse. She smiled to herself as she went back to the drawing-room. An elaborate tea was being made ready, and the second post had brought her a letter that had been set against her place at the head of the table. It was only from Mrs. Turner asking about the paper for the staircase, and whether Miss Fingal would have some patterns sent down to her; but it made her feel important, it was another new experience: "everything is happening to-day," she thought. She went to the window to watch for her visitors, but

it was nearly dark, and the waiter came in to light up the room and draw the curtains. "I'll go up to choose the paper," she said to herself, thinking it would be an adventure.

There was a rumbling in the distance, the fly was returning. Two people were coming to tea—to tea with her!

They came in, depressed by their visit to the farm, but determined to shake off a gloomy view of it. "I'm glad we went," Jimmy said. "She evidently liked seeing us, and we were careful not to stay too long."

Bertha Gilston was tall and square-shouldered; she had a pleasant face, a little weather-beaten and wind-blown, a large smile that wandered up the rather high cheek-bones to her blue eyes, and a quantity of fair hair untidily done—wisps of it strayed over her ears and fell at the back of her neck.

"It's awfully nice of you to let us invade you." She threw aside her wraps, and looked amused when they fell to the floor. "I wanted to go and see you all the winter, but there are always such heaps of things to do. Besides, I didn't know whether you would want to be burdened with a stray woman," she said.

"I should not have thought it a burden," Miss Fingal answered, conscious that she was going to like this new acquaintance.

The waiter brought a hot dish, and lighted the spirit-lamp under the kettle. Jimmy watched him with keen interest. "Bertha," he said, "we are in for a feast; I'm frightfully hungry, and not ashamed to be greedy."

Miss Fingal laughed and felt that she was happy. A shaded lamp was over the round table on which the tea was spread; its softened light fell on her face as she sat down in front of the old-fashioned japanned tea-tray.

"Ah, now I can see you," Bertha said. "Father told me about you, of course. So did Jimmy; he has wanted so much to meet you again."

"He said he was coming to Bedford Square." There was a little pique in the tone.

"I'm too modest to go and see a young lady without a direct invitation," he said meekly.

This was a point of view she had not considered, and the trivial obligations of a hostess made a direct reply unnecessary.

"A country meal, especially at an inn, is always amusing," Bertha said when it was over and they had drawn near the fire with a comfortable sense of repletion. "I fear we mustn't stay very long, but we don't want to go just yet." She opened a silver cigarette-case, attached to her waist by a chain; a match-box was carried in the same way among some other jingling things. "Won't you?" she asked, holding it out.

"No, thank you—I don't know how."

"How funny; every woman smokes now. It smooths away cares and wrinkles, and makes one even oblivious of bills."

"I don't think I should like it."

"Perhaps not. Do you mind if I do?"

"Oh no—and Mr. Gilston too, won't he?"

"Of course he will." She struck a match vigorously, and smoked in silence for a minute or two; she was evidently thinking hard. "Miss Fingal," she said, "do tell us what you thought of Linda—I feel that you are going to be intimate with her."

She wondered how much of Linda's history this woman—this girl, she surprisedly thought her—really knew, and how much she ought to be told. For Bertha liked her already—and felt it possible to like her a great deal, though she had only set eyes on her for the first time an hour or two ago; "one can always tell," she thought. "She is so simple and reserved, and rather like a book in small print that is not easy to read at first but holds one."

"I thought she seemed very ill."

"Yes, she is very ill. She has been worried to death." She smoked in silence again for a minute or two. "I wish we weren't going abroad; we start the day after to-morrow. That's why we went to see her just now. I hate leaving her, but it's lucky that you are here. How long do you think you will stay?"

"I don't know—" hesitatingly, "if she likes me——"

Bertha took the cigarette from her mouth and looked

at the lighted end. "My dear, she loved you to-day, and it is a positive comfort to her that you have Briar-patch. I wish you could stay till we come back? I expect we shall be away a month or six weeks—is that too long?"

"No; it's not too long. I want to stay."

"And you will go and see her, and look after her just a little?"

"I will—I'll do anything."

"How sporting of you!" Bertha's pleasant voice, always a little throaty, had a sigh of relief in it. "I wonder how much you know about her?"

"I know—about the divorce."

"Poor darling, her marriage turned out badly. But I don't wonder she fell in love with Dick Alliston—" she stopped abruptly—"he was a wonderful creature—he is still occasionally."

"Occasionally?" She was puzzled.

"Only occasionally," Bertha repeated regretfully. She paused and smoked reflectively for a minute. "I think you ought to know about her," she went on. "They were very much in love with each other, but she cared too much for him—adored him and showed it, which is a bad thing to happen to any man."

"I should like it to happen to me," Jimmy said.

"You may be quite certain it never will, you dear old idiot, and don't be a nuisance—I am talking to Miss Fingal. Dick adored her at first, but——" she hesitated.

"I don't know what he is up to," Jimmy said, "but I am certain that he never meant to be a scoundrel. I like him too," he explained, "but occasionally I would give a good deal to kick him, though it wouldn't mend matters and he might kick back. I have been very worried about the whole business, for it was I who first took him to Beechwood. He saw Linda, and they fell in love with each other, greatly to the consternation of her mother and my stepmother. He was all right, but he hadn't much money from their point of view."

"And he was your friend?" Aline was trying to grasp the situation.

"I knew him at Oxford. We were in different sets. He did a good deal there and I didn't. I was shuffled out and sent down, but not before he had got me out of the devil of a scrape—which was all the more to his credit, because he didn't know much about me. I tried to prove my gratitude by introducing him to Bertha. He and she were rather thick for a time——"

"Only pals," Bertha said firmly, "but I was flattered. Any man can flatter a woman," she added, with a charming apologetic smile. "He was at the Foreign Office—asked everywhere—and he cut heaps of things to come up to my little flat and talk to me and the people I like—people who write or paint or discuss things, and day-dream about themselves and their doings—" She took out another cigarette. "Of course I was flattered. A man who knew everybody, whose people were somebodies, who had done brilliantly at Oxford; a good-looking, contradictory creature, who would do—you never quite knew what next—" She stopped to look at her cigarette again.

"And he and Linda were married?" Miss Fingal was quite eager.

"And wildly happy—for a time. They had a flat in London and went out immensely. But Linda wasn't strong enough to bear it long. Her mother—Lady Hester, you know—took herself and her aquiline nose—it's just like my stepmother's—to the south of France. I dare say she borrowed a large sum from father first—" it was said without a shred of malice, only with amusement at the retrospect, "he was always a perfect lamb about money. She gave the cottage to Linda. They had musical people down at first—Linda plays beautifully—but Dick was bored with them. By the way, did you come across an absurd creature at Wavercombe called Cyril Batson?"

"Oh yes." Miss Fingal smiled and looked up. The light was falling on her hair, quiet humour was in her eyes, and, for a moment, it struck her guests that if her face was not pretty it was arresting.

"She wants illuminating, something put into her," Bertha thought. "A switch turned on would do it.

Perhaps it will come in the shape of a man, who knows?—He came to see you?” she asked.

“Yes. He came with his aunt, in a beautiful red-and-white car.”

“Of course he did,” Bertha laughed. “Dick and Linda were horribly bored by him—the funny thing is that he puts on a special pose at Wavercombe. When he comes up to my flat he is quite different; I should shake him if he wasn’t.”

Miss Fingal was not at all interested in Cyril Batson. “Oh, do go on about Linda—and Mr. Alliston,” she said.

“Then they had the writing people down, and Linda was eager about poetry and books; but only because Dick was. He grew tired of the Foreign Office, so they went off to Normandy, came back, and declared they were going to live quietly at the cottage for the rest of their lives. But he couldn’t settle down. He went up to London about some electrical thing he had invented—something that occurred to him at Oxford. He gave it away to a man who took out a patent and made a fortune. Dick made nothing by it, and said it didn’t matter so long as the thing was done,—so like him. He wrote some political articles that made a stir because of their audacity, and a post was made for him in Whitehall.”

“And Linda?”

“Stayed at the cottage alone—except when he rushed down only to rush off again. He got into a fast set—it amused him for a little while.”

“That precious Lady Violet Horton,” Jimmy put in. “You know who she is?”

“She was one of the Aston girls,” Bertha explained when Aline had shaken her head. “She married Sir Thomas Horton; he is a stupid man and she was bored, so she picked up with Cissie Repton and a very queer lot—and Dick. Linda lived in a dream with her baby, and just adored him whenever he appeared. Tommy Horton disliked the way his wife went on generally, and there were all sorts of rows. Dick did what he could to put matters right, and Cissie Repton fell in love with

him—with Dick, I mean—probably because he treated her with his usual don't-careness—don't-careness for women, I mean."

"But who is she?" Miss Fingal asked. "I don't know." This talk made her feel as if she had been invited to look through a chink at a very strange world.

"Of course, you don't." Bertha brushed the ash from the end of her cigarette with her little finger. "She is a music-hall celebrity who makes tons of money. She is pretty and men fall in heaps before her, but she doesn't take up with any one long—as soon as she can get a man she's bored by him, sends him away, and wants another."

"Oh!" The novels she had read at Battersea went hazily through Miss Fingal's mind; it occurred to her that after all they might have some likeness to real life.

"I expect she enjoys it," Bertha said thoughtfully. "She's not refined or educated, as many of them are, but she's fascinating. I felt it myself from the fourth row of stalls the other night. She can't dance; she does a few steps, stops and laughs, and looks up for applause——"

"And gets it too, damn her—I beg your pardon, Miss Fingal," Jimmy said, "but one must use appropriate words."

"And she can't sing," Bertha went on. "She has the voice of a feeble thrush with a bad cold, and her songs are silly; but somehow the notes are fresh and sweet and one listens. She gets through a verse and smiles and looks up for applause again—and gets it. Violet Horton had a quarrel with her husband, went off to Paris with Cissie Repton—who is known as Cherry Ripe among her intimates. He and Dick went to the rescue. And how the rest happened I don't know. But Cherry Ripe somehow got hold of Dick, and he stayed behind in Paris with her when the Hortons came back. Then Lord Stockton came on the scene——"

"He's a long, languid, virtuous cuss," Jimmy put in, "all over the place trying to convert everybody. I

should never be surprised at anything he did. He went to Beechwood and said that Linda—she is his cousin—was pure and beautiful and ought to be separated from Dick who was vile; and somehow the divorce was managed. I expect the whole thing was a plot between her relations—I mean my father's wife and her mother, who never liked Dick—and no doubt they lied all round: that type of woman thinks lying right when it's convenient."

"Anyhow," Bertha went on, "Linda has broken her heart; she left the cottage and hid herself."

"But her mother?"

"She never cared for any one but herself, and was always on a money hunt, so she went back to the Winter Palace Hotel at Mentone—to be near Monte Carlo. Perhaps she thought that, if Linda got a divorce from Dick, she might marry Edward Stockton in the end. But of course she wouldn't, and he is going to marry a Girton girl who took a wonderful degree."

"He won't like it," Jimmy put in.

"And Linda has her children, but there's nothing in the world before her except the probability that she will go out of it and leave them."

"She ought to have had better luck, poor dear," Jimmy said feelingly.

"Don't you think it possible she can get well?" Aline asked.

Bertha gave a little shrug. "The doctor was leaving as we arrived at the farm just now. We asked him if there was any chance for her."

"What did he say?"

"He gave a shrug, and said, 'Well——'"

"I wish I could do something for her—I would do anything in the world—give her back the cottage." Aline Fingal's low voice sounded almost passionate. "I wish I could die in her place and give her my life to live with."

"She has life enough," Bertha said wearily, "but she hasn't physical strength enough to keep hold of it. She told me she felt that to-day. It was so strange to hear her going over one or two of Dick's old arguments,

when he was in the philosophical stage. But it's wonderful of you to care so much."

"Yes, it is," Jimmy said, and surveyed Miss Fingal approvingly through the pince-nez that guarded his kindly eyes. "I knew you were the right sort that night at the Bendish's."

She looked back at him courageously and liked him. Something, even his loose mouth and his evident liking for good food and ease, suggested that he was very human. He was vulgar, but there are so many varieties of vulgarity, and they have to be endured: even she had realised that. "Don't you think her mother would come to her if she knew how ill she was?" she asked him.

"I don't think Linda wants her. As a matter of fact, there's nothing to be done except to wait." He looked at the clock. "I think we ought to be going," he turned to Bertha. "There's a train in about twelve minutes, and a man may turn up at my rooms this evening."

She searched for her wraps. "But you have told us nothing about yourself, Miss Fingal. We were awfully amused," she went on, with her soft pleasant laugh again, "when we heard that John Fingal had died leaving a fortune to a lonely young woman. I went to your Bedford Square house once, with my father. It looked like a sepulchre that wanted whitening——"

"It's being done up," its owner interrupted; "it is having electric light put in, and the staircase is to be papered."

"That will improve it, but you can't live in Bedford Square all your days. And how will you spend your money?"

This was a point of view she had not considered. "I don't know yet," she answered.

"Well—I wouldn't if I were you, of course—but you might set up an orphanage or a lunatic asylum or some sort of crank meeting-place?" Jimmy suggested.

"I don't want to do that, I want to do—I don't know what yet—I am waiting to find out." Some newly awakening consciousness in her seemed to say it.

They were puzzled for a moment. Then Bertha buttoned up her coat and pulled on her gloves: she

looked thoroughly untidy and good-humoured, with still more wisps of hair straggling over her neck and ears, but it never occurred to her to go towards a looking-glass. "Well, anyhow, try to do something amusing," she said. "For instance, you might get married."

"I don't want to," Miss Fingal answered. "Besides, there isn't any one who wants to marry me," she added simply.

"You might marry me," Jimmy suggested, "but I don't think you'd like it, any more than Stockton will like his Girton girl."

"No, she wouldn't," Bertha said, "I can tell her that. You mustn't mind anything he says, Miss Fingal, he's utterly hopeless."

"Well, come along if we're to catch that train," he fidgeted. "It will take us at least three and a half minutes to reach the station. Good-bye, Miss Fingal, glad we came; we'll do it again, and thank you very much—awfully good tea. I shall present myself at Bedford Square and persuade you to come for a spree with us when we are back—that music-hall. We'll go and hear Cherry Ripe."

"No!" she said quickly, "I couldn't do that."

"What did you think of her?" Jimmy asked when he had closed the door of the carriage they easily had to themselves in the half-empty train.

"I liked her."

"She's not a bad sort," he allowed.

"Linda seems fascinated by her."

"It is curious, for they are not a bit alike." He stopped for a moment, half hesitating, before he went on. "I wanted to get back, because Alliston may drop in to-night."

Bertha was never surprised. She opened the silver case, took out the inevitable cigarette and struck a match. "I thought you hadn't seen him for years," she said.

"I haven't. But it has been weighing on my mind lately that I didn't half appreciate all he did for me when he pulled me out of the mire by the scruff of my

neck. I believe I thought I had sufficiently proved my gratitude by taking him to see you."

"How sweet of you," she laughed.

"Probably I thought he would marry you."

"My dear Jimmy," she answered as she flicked the ash from her cigarette out of the window, "no one wants to marry me. I am a pal, a friend, the sort of woman a man chums with—and that's all."

"Does it satisfy you?" he asked curiously.

"Perfectly. The other thing would bore me."

"You are a very sensible woman. It would bore me too. All the same, when we come back I shall probably ask Miss Fingal if she will have me."

"She wouldn't look at you." Bertha was almost surprised.

"Of course she wouldn't—or I shouldn't ask her."

"Then why, my dear idiot, why?"

"It's the governor's idea, and he worries and won't be happy till she has sent me about my business. It will amuse me to hear what she says, and show him that if young women with money won't look at me something else must be done."

"Why did you suddenly ask Dick to come and see you?"

"I owe him some money—borrowed it years ago."

"And why didn't you pay him back?"

"He never seemed to want it—never came near me—and we never worried about money." He was silent for a minute or two. "I have behaved badly and know it, so there's nothing more to be said. In a sense Alliston is responsible, for though I played the fool at Oxford before I knew him I did it on the usual lines. Afterwards, being a young ass, I proceeded to imitate him as far as it was possible, and had a shy at every sort of experience of which I got a chance. But it has meant having a good time—which is the main thing in life."

"And what about the money you owe him?"

"It has bothered me lately, and I thought I should like to see him, so it struck me I would ask him if he'd come round to my rooms. The governor has given me a cheque for five hundred for our jaunt. I want to pay

him back the couple of hundred I owe and we will put the screw on a bit, if you don't mind: go second-class—which I prefer myself—and avoid staying at any hotel that calls itself a palace.”

“Of course. I hate stuffy first-class and big hotels. But you have been a thorough pig, Jimmy. You ought to have paid Dick back when he got married—somehow.”

“You are quite right,” he answered reflectively, “but I never understood money—always had it, and thought it my duty to spend it.”

“And Dick is hard up?”

“I heard so, but it mayn't be true. He has got hold of a job in Whitehall, and there is some idea of his going into Parliament when the divorce business has blown over—an easy seat. Those articles of his are not forgotten yet, and I believe he is an admirable speaker. I heard that he used to talk about the universe and so on at the Union at Oxford.”

“Didn't you belong to it?”

“Bless you, they didn't want me. It was a great mistake sending me to Oxford at all. Our highly respectable middle-class family has been demoralised by prosperity, and inconvenienced by the governor marrying a woman with a pedigree.”

Bertha reflected for a minute. “I agree with you in what you have not said.” She looked up with one of her quick smiles. “I was thoroughly wretched in the big house in Portland Place, and I am thoroughly content now that I have the flat and manage to earn a bit. I believe there's no life like the work life.”

“I dare say. But loafing and loose cash have their merits.”

They separated at Baker Street. “I won't ask you to come back with me,” he said. “I want Alliston to myself.”

“Of course you do,” she answered. “But give him my love, and say I should like to see him.”

XIII.

JIMMY'S lodgings, they called themselves chambers, were high up in one of the narrow streets that connect the Embankment with the Strand—they were in the end house nearest the river, and had windows facing both ways. He could hear the rumble of the traffic along the Embankment and, without rising from his chair, see the trees that screened it and the farther side of the river—the side that is still unkempt and picturesque: if he craned his neck he caught a glimpse of Cleopatra's Needle. In his small untidy sitting-room, in the corner between the two windows, was a roll-top writing-table; over the mantelpiece three shelves that stretched the whole length of the wall, books in the middle, at one end cigarette-boxes and a pipe rack (Jimmy despised cigars), a siphon, whisky, and Benedictine bottles; at the other end, boxing-gloves and a medley of odds and ends. On either side of the fireplace a heavy leather-covered easy-chair, a sofa that matched them on one side; in the centre of the room a small round table on which presumably was served any meal for which he did not wander forth. It all looked comfortable and suggested that its tenant was a commonplace easy-going young man who smoked and lounged, frequented restaurants, and occasionally—hence the open roll-top table—forced himself to do a little work.

A fire was burning brightly when he arrived from Leesbury, the evening paper was on the table; there were slippers by the fender; evidently the service in the chambers was fairly decent. He switched on the light and left the curtains and blinds undrawn; there was no one to overlook him, and he liked to stand and watch

the cars moving like great insects along the wide road beneath, and the lights of the slower river craft. To Jimmy, life and movement were of supreme interest; as far as possible he liked it to be natural or, as he would have put it, unadulterated. He disliked fuss and trappings and shams—off the stage. An artistic room would have made him impatient as well as uncomfortable, and he would not have changed his present surroundings for the best rooms in St. James's Street, nor a house in Mayfair: either would have bored him after the first curiosity and inspection, and interfered with the chastity of his language.

He had time to kick off his boots and look at the late news before he heard a crisp quick ring at the outside bell.

Dick Alliston entered with his head erect and a hesitation that was pleasantly defiant in his manner. He looked young and as if time would have no power to take his youth from him; he had very bright eyes with a questing expression, as if he knew of a splendour far ahead that he was impatiently seeking. And the charm of his voice, fresh and eager as his eyes, suggested that, no matter what he had done, he was incapable of meanness and somehow acquitted by his conscience—that he had probably been impelled by a spirit of adventure, not by viciousness or weakness. Curiously, with all this, in repose his face had a disappointed expression, till suddenly, as if a flashlight passed, it was lighted up and he recovered the joy of earth and the longing for the hidden achievement that seemed possible if he could but reach to it.

He gave a quick glance round the room. "Oh, this is it; I didn't know where you were till I had your note," he said. "You look comfortable."

"I am," Jimmy was laconic as usual.

"Such a good pitch—only the sky to look in, and everything to look out at; and the tram-cars and Cleopatra's Needle each represent a great civilisation, at opposite end of time."

"The head and tail of it?"

Alliston turned sharply from the window. "I should

have come before if I had known you would see me and not blaspheme."

"Why should I?"

"Oh, I'm supposed to be a scoundrel and the rest."

"I may be one myself some day—who knows? I've been a fool, which is the usual alternative."

"But why did you want to see me? I have been looking back all day—and feeling like Lot's wife." He crossed the room twice, restless and uneasy, before he said, almost vehemently, "Do you know how Linda is? I was going to write to Bertha; then I heard from you and thought you would probably know."

"I saw her this afternoon. She's ill."

"Very?"

"I'm afraid so," Jimmy answered slowly.

"I expect I've killed her." Alliston ground his teeth and sat down on the arm of one of the chairs by the fire.

"I should say you've helped."

"And there's nothing I can do—she's so far behind. And the children? Did you see them?"

"Yes; good little kids, I rather liked them."

Alliston got up. "I want to see them—I must in the future. I should like to have them, though God knows whether it would be good for them, or what I should do with them." He crossed the room again, and stood looking at the books, took down two or three and contemptuously put them back. "What stuff you read!"

"It suits me," Jimmy answered; then with conviction, "Look here, Dick, you mustn't attempt to interfere with Linda and the children."

"I don't mean to interfere, though I want them. If leaving them alone is a mistake, it will be the penalty of what I have done to her, and they'll pay it as well as I—it generally goes that way."

"What do you mean?"

"There are the larger issues, the great distances, the ultimate gain. The children may be fools, or criminals, or geniuses, or the world's deliverers—if the world wants deliverers—that sort of thing shouldn't be thwarted by

one individual, by their hanging on to her or hanging on to me. But the whole thing is intangible, and human capacities are so fettered that one never knows—and we are talking rot—at least I am. He looked up with an eager boyish expression in his eyes. "Where is she?"

"At Highbrook Farm."

"Highbrook Farm of all places!" He walked across the room again, as if the movement helped him. "We stayed there once for a week. I used to go to the links in the morning, and she went in and out among the old women at the almshouses: they loved her, everything did—she was so pretty no one could help it."

"I know—" Jimmy answered. "I even put up with my stepmother for her sake—that was before you came on the scene, damn you!" he added tenderly, "when she was a leggy little girl of ten at Wavercombe."

Dick stopped and considered for a moment. "I hated the people at Wavercombe, but the happiest hours of my life were spent at the cottage, life at its best—when it was nectar."

"You might have been having it now, nectar included."

"One doesn't want it always. It wasn't satisfying enough to last. I had to go on farther—she stayed behind."

"Why didn't you take her with you?"

"She didn't see it. She wanted to stay for ever at the cottage—the comfort and love-making of life, bearing a child now and then, and being generally adorable. I could no more be content with it for ever than I could remain young always. Happiness can be overrated—that sort of comfortable happiness—a woman to love, enough money and nothing to do. The best side of me lazily worshipped her, but the best side of a man isn't the whole of him, and the other side chafed, and became curious and restless."

"In fact, she was too good for you."

"That's it, Jimmy. You see, we had talked out everything, and agreed on too many things. She always agreed about anything that was my idea. There were no surprises in her, and when the talk was over she had no curiosity about the things we had discussed—she left

it at that. She wanted nothing different in her life, nothing disturbed: but one can't read the same book over and over countless times, no matter how nice it is, unless one's a monk or a country parson, or for ever go on looking at a thing that is beautiful but never changes. I wanted to see more—know more—slake my hunger in other directions, to satisfy it—and broke away. I adored her, but it was no good. I love her still—other women have only been experiments—but I couldn't go back and live the same sort of life with her and be content—it was a life without roots or growths, the bloom of a summer that came to an end, and I went."

"I shouldn't think you got much out of the music-hall lady?"

He made a sound of scorn. "She was just by the way; she lifted a latch, that was all. I didn't mean it to come to what it did; and I thought Linda would never know, which is what one always thinks—men are frightful skunks, if they go off the rails about women at all; and when I realised it everything was over. I felt that after all I wasn't fit to go back to her, to be with her. I couldn't have done it. I couldn't do it now, though she is the one pure thing, the rose in my garden of life—I speak like a minor poet, Jimmy. Give me a whisky-and-soda—I'll help myself." He reached down the siphon and made a long drink. "If I thought she wouldn't know it I'd go down one day just to walk round the house that contains her, it would feel like going to church."

"You had better not let her see you."

Dick reflected for a moment. "I won't risk it. Some one might recognise me and tell her. People cackle so. By the way, I heard that old Fingal, to whom I objected because he put pomatum on his hair, left Briarpatch to a niece. Does she live there?"

"Not much; only been once since she had it. She is at Leesbury now, at the 'White Hart.' She has been to see Linda."

"Oh—it's a queer world; old Fingal's niece and Linda. . . . You haven't told me yet why you wanted to see me, Jimmy?"

"Well, it's an odd thing to say, but I have been ashamed of not paying that two hundred you lent me long ago."

"My dear chap, I had forgotten all about it, so why worry?"

"I'm not going to worry, only to pay it back. I ought to have done so years ago." He brought a cheque, already made out, from a pigeon-hole of the table. "I might have sent it by post, but I owe you, in other ways, a good deal more than this, and felt I would like to see you again."

"Good old Jimmy," Dick said half-sadly.

"Look here, you lectured me once when you saved me from temporary damnation. It's my turn now. If people chucked the obligations they have taken on themselves, wives and children and the rest, when they became bored with them, it would be the devil."

"I know that, and it's the devil for me."

"Linda would have been all right if you had stayed with her," Jimmy went on. "She has a capacity for thinking—I saw that to-day—and when she came to know you better she would probably have been much less in love with you, and contradicted you as flatly as you pleased, perhaps have found out that other men were just as agreeable, or more so, than you—that would have brought you to your senses. Why couldn't you wait?"

"Because I'm a selfish brute, a hurrying fool, for whom nothing goes quickly enough. I tear the heart out of everything I can get at—and go on."

"But what the devil is it you do want? I never could get at it."

"Nor I. It's no good. I'm one of the damned, I suppose. Jimmy," he looked towards the writing-table, "do you ever do any work?"

"Not if I can help it; wish I did, but it doesn't interest me."

"Most things have been done by the magnificent people who have gone; the world is being filled with imitation goods and people without ideals—but there's a remedy hanging about somewhere; we shall come upon it one day, I am always groping after it."

"Won't be happy till you get it? What else are you doing besides groping?"

"Making excuses for others—I'm only an excuse myself, not a necessity—from ten till four in Whitehall, in return for four hundred a year. But man must live, as well as the horse in the stable or the cow in the field." He went towards the door. "Give my love to Bertha. I'll go and see her soon."

"She's going away for a month or six weeks."

"Oh——" He thought for a moment, then turned back. "There used to be a good doctor at Leesbury—is he seeing Linda?"

"Wynne? Tall, with a red moustache?"

"That's the man. He's a brother of Albery Wynne, the throat specialist, friend of mine."

"We saw him this afternoon. He was leaving the farm as we arrived."

"But who else is looking after her? Is she alone?"

"Yes, I believe so, with the children. But my step-mother keeps her more or less in hand—she has a distinct sense of obligation regarding her own relations: I rather like her for it. The Fingal young woman at the White Hart seems inclined to look after her too—perhaps she'll send her back to the cottage."

Dick stared at him. "Back to the cottage—alone—My God! Good-bye." He turned abruptly, opened the door, closed it after himself, and ran down the lead-covered stairs at breakneck speed.

"Mad—not a criminal, only a lunatic," Jimmy said to himself, as he carefully picked out a pipe from the rack.

Outside, Alliston looked at his watch. It was half-past eight. He had eaten nothing for hours. A few doors up there was an oyster shop. He stood at the counter and gulped down a dozen natives, thinking hard the while. Then he remembered Hungerford Bridge. . . . He went up the dark steps, walked briskly half-way across it, and stopped to look down at the river, at the Embankment with its dim trees and the traffic seen through them, and the great buildings farther back. The sky overhead was a deep grey. Here and

there the stars looked down as if watching the lights on the water. The whole scene calmed him, comforted him. "This is one of the finest standing-places in Europe," he said. "In this light everything looks beautiful from it, wise and mysterious—as if generations had marched to the banks of the river, bringing their dreams, the imaginings of their brains, the work of their hands—but for whom and for what?"

Presently, with a start, he thought—"Of course, Alberty Wynne! That's how I'll manage it." A long look at the river and at either side of it, at the misty distance, and the little barge with the blinking lamp that was coming towards him—he waited till it was almost underneath—then he turned away, picked up a taxi by the underground station, and drove to Wimpole Street. An empty car before the house at which he stopped made way for him.

"Dr. Wynne?" he asked the servant who answered his knock.

Dr. and Mrs. Wynne were just going out, he was told.

"Doesn't matter, he'll see me;" he strode into the consulting-room at the back.

The doctor came in a moment later, in evening dress. A woman rustled past the door and along the hall, presumably to the waiting car. The throat specialist was a tall red-haired man, like his brother the country doctor. "My dear Alliston," he said, hurried but not surprised, "I can only give you a moment. I'm taking my wife to the Frivolity. Your friend Miss Repton has kindly sent us a box."

"Good Lord!"

"I have had to put her throat in some sort of order for her new song to-night. It's not very strong—I think it is better—but you probably know all about that?"

"No," with a snap. "I sent her to you last year because you were the best man for her purpose. I have not seen her lately."

"Oh—I thought you were great friends still?"

"She has too many to remember me long, and I had almost forgotten her."

"Oh—she's not a bad sort, you know—we are going round to her dressing-room after the performance."

"God in heaven! She'll probably offer to take you on to one of her night clubs, where you will see a section of what is known as the 'Smart Set'—practising the new code of manners and morals. And yet we wonder at the downfall of an aristocracy that has chummed with the devil and weltered in the gutter."

"All right, my dear fellow—but what have you come about?"

"My wife. The girl who was my wife is at Highbrook Farm. I hear she's very ill."

"I know—my brother was in London yesterday and told me."

"Did he say it was serious?"

Dr. Wynne nodded and added, "Very."

"And I am helpless," Alliston said under his breath, and sat down on the arm of a heavy chair, just as he had in Jimmy's room, "and there are the children. If she dies I suppose they would go to that precious Lady Gilston, a politic worldly woman who does her duty by rule and measure."

"She might let you have them if you cut yourself adrift from—other ties."

"I have no other ties. I never had any but those at Leesbury. I was mad, a fool, a scoundrel if you like, Wynne, but if—I have killed Linda," his hand tightened on the chair-back for a moment, "I must get the children somehow——"

"There might be difficulties. . . . The Gilstons are rich. But Lady Gilston is not a bad sort; I have met her several times——"

"And the worst of it is I am going broke over those beastly South American railways." Then suddenly, "It's time you went to your music-hall. I'm off." He held out his hand. "I wanted to be sure. Write to me if you hear anything—the old address."

The doctor grasped his hand. "I will, and I'll do anything I can, old chap, but I'm afraid there's nothing." They went out together. Dick swept the tragedy out of his mind for a minute while he said a word or two

and laughed gaily with Mrs. Wynne, waiting in the car for her husband, then disappeared in the darkness.

"Alliston has been an awful fool," the doctor said when he had told his wife the reason of the visit. "It might be his salvation to get hold of those children, and from his manner just now I shouldn't be surprised if he had tired of Miss Cissie Repton and her world."

"And if she realised about the children she might leave him alone."

"She might, or—she is coming to see me in the morning. I could tell her about them. I don't suppose he has even mentioned his wife to her. He has some fine feelings of his own that would prevent it."

"She might take it into her head to marry him?"

He shook his head. "Not if he is broke . . . and she wouldn't want a couple of children to bring up. Here we are."

"What a lovely portrait that is of her," Mrs. Wynne said as they went through the vestibule to their box.

"She looks common, but she's pretty," he agreed.

XIV.

ALINE FINGAL sat with her breakfast tray before her, and lived yesterday over again—the drive to the farm, the red-druggeted stairs, Janet's doubtful voice as she showed her into the empty room, and the moment when Linda Alliston had stood in the farther doorway. She had seen her, heard her! She had known that it would mean a good deal to her, but it had been far more than she could have imagined. She felt that the white hands with the slipping rings held some key to life, to the life for which she had been waiting. Perhaps Linda had felt it too, for had she not called her by her Christian name, and kissed her? She looked out across the common: spring seemed to be touching it already though January was not over. She opened the window, and the sunlight, soft and warm, touched her face as if it took account of her. A little mist hung about the wood on the left and hid what in a mountainous place would have been called the foot-hills, and in the distance on the right, clearer, for there was less vegetation, were the rising, unfinished villas, and beyond them she knew were the golf links that had brought Dick Alliston to Leesbury. She wondered what he looked like; and wished Bertha had told her that he and Linda might some day be together again. She was too unsophisticated to take in the significance of Bertha's account of all that had happened; the mere fact that Jimmy had punctuated it with mildly humorous remarks weakened it to her. It seemed as if there had been a good deal of mischief-making and bad luck about it all. If Dick Alliston could know how ill Linda was now he might entreat her forgiveness and all the tragedy would be

swept away, and they should go back to the cottage if they would, and find it just as they had left it, save that some of the things they had meant to do would be done already and awaiting them. "Oh, they should have it, they should have it! How wonderful it would be. It would make her well," she cried aloud. When she had gone through the interview with Linda she left the farm in her thoughts and walked back to the hotel, and went over the meeting in the dim light outside with Bertha and Jimmy, and the tea-party later. It was so unbelievable to think that it was *her* party, *her* table, that they had been *her* guests. Her face lighted up as she realised it. She had liked them and everything about them, Jimmy's blue eyes and the loose mouth that suggested he was greedy—and he was; it amused her to remember how he had exulted over the rich buttered cake and the jam, and Bertha's large smile that seemed to come from a large heart, the untidy wisps of golden-brown hair, the calm, well-modulated voice; and the cigarette-smoking that was so apposite to her whole personality. While she thought of them she laughed a little, and forgot Linda.

But in spite of the pleasant memories it was a blank day. She walked along the road in the morning, half a mile in every direction, afraid to go far lest she should miss some messenger, some sign for which she longed. She sat through nearly the whole afternoon by the window. It had been her good fortune, though she did not realise it, never to face rows of houses. Even in Bedford Square there had been the enclosure between them. Battersea Park with its distances and trees and hidden lake and band, Wavercombe with its green, and now Leesbury and its common—all of them led to somewhere that was strange and perhaps held a mystery, a message that was slowly drifting towards her. She was getting ready, unconsciously waiting for it. . . . And the hours went by, shapeless, yet charged with expectancy, for yesterday there had begun an obsession for Linda Alliston. . . .

The day passed and the next came, and still she sat watching with her hands folded, and disappointment stealing into her heart. But in the afternoon, while she

was wondering whether she had courage to go to the farm, the door opened and Linda entered, her face showing how great had been the exertion of her coming.

"Oh, you shouldn't—you shouldn't," Aline exclaimed with joyful dismay. "I was thinking of going to you—longing to go."

Linda sat down breathless, and waited to recover. "I wanted to come," she managed to whisper; "in a minute I shall be better. It's a good day with me. I am stronger, and walked all the way."

"Walked! Oh, it was much too far."

"I wanted to do it once again. I know the road so well—I felt I must see it again." Her eyes wandered round the room. "It all looks just the same. We sat here once through a great thunderstorm and watched the lightning—I must wait a minute; I shall be well directly." She went to a chair near the window and took off her hat. Aline, standing by her, saw how lovely was the tumbled hair, the hair that was nearly the same colour as her own, but much more beautiful: she loved it. Never in her life had she been stirred as she was stirred by this girl, whom only once had she seen before. She was aware of it, and almost awestruck at its strangeness.

"An open window and a blazing fire; it's always good," Linda said, looking outwards when she was better. "I'm so glad I came. I can see the way to the links once more—across the common and past those half-built villas; and those poor gorse bushes, how brown they are, but they'll be golden soon. Oh, I am glad I came," she repeated with a long sigh of content.

"It was too far for you."

"I didn't do it all at once. I rested in one of the cottages for a long time. I liked seeing the old women again, but their back gardens are horribly untidy, and the pig-sties are empty. They were quite pleased to see me—the old women, I mean, not the pig-sties." She looked up and laughed: it was music to her listener. "I told them that if they planted scarlet-runners this year they must be sure to put in some con-

volvulus seed, as they did last time. It grew up tall, over the sticks, and flowered in and out among the beans. It showed that the poor old dears had a sense of beauty in them; but all people have, though they don't always find it out in time. Don't you think so, Aline?"

"I don't know." Aline answered vaguely, glad to be called by her name again, but not yet at ease with her visitor.

"I stayed for nearly an hour with them," she went on, "but I am very tired though I rested on a grassy bank by the wayside."

"You mustn't walk back—you couldn't." Miss Fingal rang the bell. "Bring some tea," she told the waiter, "and see that the fly is ready presently. I am going to take Mrs. Alliston back to the farm——"

"In an hour, not longer," Linda said. When they were alone again she held her friend's hands against her face. "How kind of you to think of the fly. And are you really going to take me back?" She put a little soft kiss on the hand before she let go.

"You mustn't!" Aline was almost frightened at her own joy. "No one ever did anything like that to me—ever at all."

"Not even when you were ill?"

"I have never been ill."

"Never ill—how strange. I didn't know till lately how wonderful it was to be well; now it's all over."

"Oh no——"

"Yes, it is. George Eliot said that life was divided into many chapters before the last one we call death. The one in which I was well and happy is over and finished."

"I have felt that—I mean that life is divided into chapters. I said it once to Mrs. Bendish," Aline was half-frightened. "Perhaps I read it, or I may have thought it."

"Who knows? I often feel that there is an intangible currency of thought. It would account for the way things drift, without meetings or knowledge, from one to the other, and for two people getting hold of the same idea."

"I wish I could think of things as you do—" Aline said.

"But I have only begun to think this last year, because I've been alone and suffered. Oh, I have suffered so—" Linda raised her arms and clasped her hands on her hair as if to keep back a moan. "But it has taught me a great deal. Nothing makes one think as pain does—inward-racking pain, that has to be borne alone."

"But when you were happy?"

"I was taken up with an overwhelming love, absorbed in it. I had thought of nothing, cared for nothing before it came. My mother and I had been together, but she had her own interests and never told me about them. I just lived and waited—I didn't know for what, till Dick came and swept me off my feet, and I loved him so much that it isolated me; and when he went I was alone in a wilderness. I have the children," she said wearily, "and I adore them because they are his. Since he went I've tried to disentangle the things he used to talk about, and arrive somewhere—some mystical somewhere I cannot explain. But when he was with me I couldn't care for anything at all—only for him—my Dick—and sometimes I have thought that, just as love gave him to me, so it sent him away. But he has left me many of his thoughts—as a sort of legacy. I go over them again and again."

"He will come back," Aline whispered.

Linda shook her head. "No; let us talk of something else," she said abruptly. "Yes—give me some tea."

She looked beautiful as she sat in the easy-chair, facing the light; better for her rest and the obvious admiration that Aline gave her. The colour came to her face, her eyes grew bright and filled for just a little while with something that passed for happiness. It was so good to be loved again—almost worshipped.

"I wish I knew more about you, you quaint thing," she said gratefully, "though you told me a good deal the other day. Have you no friends at all who care for you and look after you?"

"No, no one at all. You see, I am not clever," Aline answered simply. "I think I might be different if I

saw you sometimes. You are not like any one else." She bent down towards the face looking up at her; she felt as if she were drawing in the life that seemed to be escaping and quickening the whole atmosphere.

"You shall see me very often if you like, but perhaps you won't stay here very long?"

"I will stay as long as you want me." And then, with bated breath, Aline asked the question that had been in her mind. "Would you care to go back to the cottage at Wavercombe? I will give it to you. I want you to go there."

Linda shook her head; she sat very still looking at the fire. Then, suddenly, she took up the thread again. "I couldn't go there, but I'm glad it's yours. I couldn't bear to think of Mr. Fingal living in it. I used to be afraid of him when he stayed at the vicarage. He was so hard and precise, but you are different. Go there a great deal, Aline, and be happy; make it a little temple dedicated to happiness. And you are sure to go abroad at different times—I should like to think that you would go to Avranches and Mont-Saint-Michel. You know where they are?" amused at the inquiring eyes.

"Oh yes," Aline answered meekly, glad that at least she did know this one thing. "And Miss Gilston told me you had been there."

"Dear Bertha! You must make a friend of her. She is full of humanity, and knows a great deal of which she has no experience—some wise people do—life has taken them into its confidence. It was she who told us to go to Avranches."

"Why do you want me to go there?"

"Because that is the place, after the cottage, that is most vivid to me and where I was happiest. I should like to think that some one else would be happy there."

"Tell me about it."

"It's a little place. We drove to it from the coast, all the way. They were such straight roads—we could see far, far ahead—long white roads with trees on either side: perhaps they are spoiled now—I don't know. At Avranches you could stay at the little hotel with green

shutters to its windows. I forget its name, but it has a rose-garden, and is very peaceful. In one of the churches there is a tomb, with a glass case on it, long and narrow, holding the wax effigy of a girl. I felt as if I had known her when I looked at her first—known her and forgotten. She has hair rather like yours, her face is the same shape. She is dressed in white satin, and she looks tragic, but calm and remote. I think of her sometimes and wonder if she is young still—the poor wax effigy lying there is young; why should she, for whom time is at an end, grow old? I felt as if I had gone there to see her, as if she knew I was standing by her though she could make no sign. You must go and see her too, Aline.”

“Yes,” almost in a whisper.

“And from Avranches you can drive to Mont-Saint-Michel: it’s a wonderful place. We had a high room in one of the crazy old houses looking on the sea. The sea came close up beneath our windows, and we sat up late looking at it—listening; but in the morning the tide had gone and only the sands were left. Over the sands a religious procession—red-robed and white-gowned—was coming, from the mainland, with a golden cross held high in front of it. The sunshine fell on the red and white, and sparkled on the sea that had gone back into the distance, and summer was over everything—summer swathed and beautified the world. We heard them singing——”

Aline shut her eyes for a moment. Her soul seemed to go outwards to the sea—to the sand; she could hear the voices chanting—she could see the cross uplifted in the sunshine; and the summer air, soft and warm, fanned her.

“I think I must have been there,” she said; “I can see it all—when you tell me things I seem to remember them. Did you ever feel that with any one?”

“I don’t know,” Linda answered as if to herself, and leaning towards the fire she put out her hands towards it, thin white hands that seemed to hunger for warmth. “It may be a tide that flows towards us and ebbs—and sometimes the same wave has reached us.” It was

only whispered to the flame that was shooting upwards. There was a long silence. Suddenly she looked up. "Aline."

"Yes?"

"I want you to come and see the children—soon."

"Yes."

She was silent for a moment, then quickly, as if afraid of losing something she was trying to lay hold of before it drifted from her thoughts, "I wonder if you'll marry—marry and have children—it's dreadful not to have children, it means living in a *cul-de-sac*—do you hear, you dear thing?"

Aline was bewildered. "But I never knew any children."

"You shall begin by knowing mine. You can't see them to-day, and to-morrow I must rest, but come the day after. I want you," she repeated.

XV.

Two days later she went, reluctantly and half afraid because of the children. She had none of the maternal feelings that come naturally to most women. But she knew she had to see the children, and she forced herself to do it. She walked there by the short cut. There were snowdrops in the hedges now as well as violets, and overhead, among the trees beside the lane, the wild sweet note of thrush and blackbird broke the stillness; but she saw and heard nothing. She walked on with no power to resist that which gently but irresistibly drove her towards the meeting that awaited her.

Linda looked worn out, and was a little absent-minded in her greeting, as if she had been disturbed in the midst of anxious thinking.

"The children will be here directly," she said when Aline had nervously sat down. "I told Janet to bring them in the moment they returned. They come in early, for it so soon gets chilly. They are gathering some violets for you." She put her hand to her throat and looked up half piteously. "I've been stupidly ill since I saw you, and sometimes a horrid spasm comes. I tried to go out to-day, but even once round the garden was too much for me."

"Let me drive you out on the sunny days," Aline said, eager to do something for her friend; "we won't have the joggy fly——"

Linda looked up with a smile. "The poor horse is so bony, and seems very tired, doesn't it?"

"We will have a carriage, or a car down from London."

But she shook her head. "Even driving fatigues me. And you must do all the visiting now, I can't go to you

again—it was too much. I wish the children would come. Sturdie is so like his father”; her face lighted up while she spoke.

“I didn’t like to ask the other day—but if it doesn’t hurt, tell me about him—I mean only what he was like,” she added hurriedly.

Linda leant her elbow on her knee and looked into space, and while she spoke Aline could see him, just as she had seen the Normandy places the other day. “He was impatient and dreamy and happy—all in turn—and he worshipped the world—just the world itself—the universe, the sun and moon and all the stars, I think”—she added with a little laugh, “and human beings were of such little account compared to the demands that other things seemed to make upon him. He cared for no one very long. I know he loved me, but I was only a day in his summer.”

“You have the children,” Aline said, mystified and confused. “They will make you happier——”

“And his best life is in the children,” she answered with a smile that transfigured her. She stopped for a moment. “And they are mine—he gave them to me—his wonderful gift—they are a bit of all that was ours for a little while, such a little while—my splendid Dick!”

“I know . . .” Aline answered again as if hypnotised, “I understand—when I close my eyes I can see and feel as you do.”

Linda looked at her, a long searching, inquiring gaze, and peace seemed to find its way to her heart. “I believe you can—” she said. “And I think there will come to us both the meaning of all this. Only—” with a long sigh—“I’m so tired of pain.”

“You will be better soon—you must be,” Aline said, “for them,” she added lamely.

“They are the world to me now. If I could only get strong! My soul is stronger than the body that holds it,” she went on passionately. “The outward me seems to be dropping away down into the earth again—I feel sometimes as if I were only clutching at it—but life itself cannot go—surely that cannot? If we only knew what life is,” she went on half to herself, “we could

fight for it better—but at times it seems as if we were led up a blind alley. Here they are”—as the door opened. She was another being, a joyous one, as the children entered.

Sturdie ran towards her, and Bridget smiled from Janet's arms. "My darlings, my darlings!" She went down on her knees to be even with Sturdie's face, and kissed him eagerly. He wore a little green sweater that was rather too big for him, and a green cap with a tassel. "My precious one," she said, "here is Miss Fingal—Aline—that is her name, darling—I am so glad she has come to see you."

He put his head on one side and said "Mummy," and rubbed his cheek against hers, and then, as if he knew it was his sister's turn to be caressed, drew aside. Janet set down little Bridget and Linda kissed her too and called her Kitten and many other names before she looked at her friend waiting nervously on the sofa. "Aline has come on purpose to see you, dears," she repeated. "Say 'How do you do?' to her, Sturdie." But Sturdie shrank back, holding his mother's skirt.

"Won't you speak to me?" Miss Fingal said timidly. He shook his head and hid his face.

"This one will," Linda said, and softly pushed Bridget forward. But Bridget turned away too. "They'll get used to you soon."

"It's only because you are strange, ma'am," Janet said, touched by the distress on Miss Fingal's face. "They'll get to know you and be fond of you."

"They will, dear—I know they will," Linda added anxiously.

"This is the lady we gathered the violets for, Master Sturdie," Janet told him. "Don't you want to give them to her?" She fetched a little basket from outside the door and gave it to him."

He looked at Miss Fingal doubtfully; then, going towards her he held it out with his face carefully turned away.

"Thank you, darling, it's very kind of you." He hesitated and then, as if reassured by her voice, went a little nearer. She bent and kissed the top of his head.

The touch of the soft hair against her lips thrilled her. She had never kissed a child before. "Oh, I wish they would know me and like me a little," she said humbly.

"They will, they will," Linda answered. "Would you like to hold Bridget for a moment?" But Bridget wanted none of Miss Fingal, and clung to her nurse.

"It's just a stranger they object to," Janet explained, "they'll be all right in a time or two, ma'am. I think I had better take them now. They'll get over the firstness, and next time they'll be better."

It was a relief when they went. "I never knew any one who was little," Aline said in an apologetic voice, "nor any one who was young, since I went to school. I have been waiting, I think I knew I was waiting—at Battersea when I used to hear the children's voices in the Park." She got up to go.

Linda took her hands. "I think you were," she said. "When will you come again? Come to tea with me and the children—people get more friendly sitting at a table—not to-morrow—I always have to rest after seeing a visitor. Dr. Wynne doesn't allow me to have one two days running. And the day after, cousin Augusta will be here. She has heard from mother who has some idea of coming to fetch us and taking us out to Mentone; but I don't want to go away from this place—I couldn't. Come to tea on Saturday. It will be such a good preparation for Sunday. But what will you do without us for three days?" she asked, with the little laugh that was always gay and fresh.

"I think I will go to London to-morrow just for two nights, and choose a paper for the staircase at Bedford Square."

"How nice. You must bring back a bit to show me; we'll try to imagine how it will look."

"Oh, I should like to bring you all sorts of things," escaped from Aline's lips.

"Bring a cake," Linda said, and clapped her hands feebly, for she was very tired, "a large plum-cake with sugar on the top, for tea on Saturday. I adore plum-cake, and it is such a long time since I saw one; and Sturdie will be subjugated altogether."

"Tell me something else—hundreds of things."

"We don't want anything else, only the big plum-cake. But I think you are a darling. And you have such sweet eyes. I should like to kiss them." She leant towards her. It was almost more than the lone woman could bear. "And the children will love you—they will love you."

All the way back she repeated to herself, "The children will love you, they will love you." The words seemed to go through her, to sink into her heart and soul.

XVI.

SHE decided not to go to London till the afternoon. In the morning, crossing the road, ahead of her as if to some woods on the right, she saw the children with Janet. She made a hurried step forward, then drew back, afraid lest they should resent her advances again, and she had no means of bribing them to consider her. On Saturday she would bring back a cake and anything else that suggested itself as likely to please them. She remembered the orange tree she had sent the Bendish child. It had been a success; she would bring one for Sturdie. If she could only think of things to say that pleased children? They perplexed her, frightened her, she had no idea how to propitiate them. And yet she wanted to win the confidence of these two babies; for their mother had hypnotised her—she felt drawn to her as to nothing else on earth.

All this went through her mind while she sat by the open window in the hour before her train started for London. And she thought what a good thing it was to have money. Its power was only slowly dawning on her: she had accepted the things that came from it without much elation—the living in different places, or going to the stalls at a concert instead of to the gallery, and writing cheques when she wanted to help charitably instead of sending a trivial postal order; but from the pleasures and excitements on which other women would have spent freely she held aloof. With dress she hardly concerned herself, and it simply never occurred to her to buy a jewel; the nearest approach to one on which she had ventured was a little white-

faced watch set in a flexible gold band: the buying of it at an expensive jeweller's had been one of the events of the winter. She had liked Linda's soft-falling raiment, and the lace about her neck, and the diamond arrow brooch, or the quaint opal pin with which it was usually fastened; but she didn't want such things herself; they would have embarrassed her—as the children did. She rested her chin on her hands as she looked outwards across the common. The little patches of gorse had more spots of gold than even three days ago, the bits of green were more vivid. She thought of the garden at the farm with the Dutch pathway, and of how Linda had pushed open the window that first day to look for the children, and the sunshine had come in and flooded the room. It reminded her of the possibility of Lady Hester coming and taking her and the children back to the sunshine of Mentone. But if Linda was not able to bear the motion of a car she would hardly be able to make so long a journey. When Linda was well—or . . . she looked at the alternative scared and breathless, afraid and yet curious, as if unconsciously she knew that some strange development, that was inevitable, marched with it; and there was nothing to do but to wait—again and always to wait.

The hoot of a closed car that had stopped before the hotel made her look down. A woman, her head swathed in a motor-veil, leant forward, while the chauffeur spoke to the ostler, asking the way to Highbrook Farm. A moment later it had gone.

"I wonder if it is Lady Hester," Miss Fingal thought, and craned her neck to watch the car out of sight. "If she has come to take her away I will follow her. She will want me—I know she will want me." But there was nothing to be done now. A clock on the mantelpiece struck four and startled her. It was time to get ready for the train. She thought for a moment of the motor-car going towards the farm and followed it in her thoughts—it was nearly there—she could see it stop before the gate which the boy, who always was working near it, opened; she could hear the clanging bell with the iron pulley. . . . It wasn't Lady Hester, it

was some one who was young; she was certain of that, though the face had been hidden.

She rang and ordered a cup of tea; she remembered that Mrs. Webb had brought her one before she left the cottage, and she had gathered that it was the usual feminine prelude to a journey. She was reluctant to go. Stimson was anxious about the wall-paper; but she wasn't much interested in it any longer, nor even in the prospect of electric light, though she recognised that it would be a good thing to send away the shadows in the drawing-room. But she seemed to have so little life, or consciousness of life, when she was in Bedford Square—here at Leesbury it was different—even the fact that she was going back, though only for a couple of days, seemed to deaden her.

The landlord carried her hand-luggage to the station. He liked the soft-spoken young lady on the first floor, and took it upon himself to see her off. They would be glad to see her back, he assured her, as he put her into an empty carriage. The door was shut and in a minute she had started. As he turned to go back he noticed the signal-post. "Very odd," he said to himself. "Looks now as if the three-fifteen wasn't going to stop here."

XVII.

ALL the afternoon Linda had been lying on the sofa, wrestling with pain and weakness. "It is only one of my black days," she told herself, "and all things get over in time." The fire crackled in the old-fashioned grate, the window was open ready for the sunshine to enter; it was always a delight to her when it came round the corner of the house to take the garden into its embrace. She had not seen the children since the morning; it seemed a long time; she wanted to hear their voices and their pattering feet. Janet had discreetly kept them out of the way, but now that she was getting better they should come and talk their baby talk to her. It always did her good—and, O God! how much she loved them. A sense of desperation was upon her. Her mother had written that morning another letter, saying positively that she would come to England "almost immediately to arrange something about the children." "I won't let her arrange anything, they are mine—mine only," she cried to herself, "and no one else shall arrange their lives."

She remembered her own childhood, its early isolation, its sense that she was in the way and unwanted, that her nature and outlook were considered tiresome. Later, as she grew up and was pretty, she had been an interest to her mother, who tried to encourage feminine vanity and extravagances in her, to nourish ambitions, and to instruct her in the little wordly ways she hated and despised. Her cousin, Edward Stockton, a peer and rich, was carefully brought on the scene. She did not think he cared for her very much. He was a man of theories rather than emotions. He had liked her sim-

plicity, her love of the country, of poetry and music, of all that he thought desirable to a half-intellectual, well-ordered manner of life, the life he meant to lead when he was tired of social experiments. He belonged to all sorts of Societies at present; he looked after charities, occasionally gave large sums to them, and wore an air of conscious virtue and of having a reserve of goodness to call upon, though for philanthropic reasons he mingled with the world. Linda had the intuition with which the unsophisticated are often endowed, as compensation perhaps for their lack of actual knowledge, and knew that he enjoyed the queer dissipations to which he took himself with a half-chastened, half-benevolent smile on his clean-shaven face. She heard of his lecturing at night-refuges, of his visiting settlements; but behind everything she felt that there was curiosity or theory rather than heart and human sympathy, just as behind his desire to marry her she felt there was theory and approval of the project rather than love. Lady Hester was always sensible of his title and £20,000 a year, and wanted Linda to share them; but it was no good. Linda refused him, and fell in love with Dick Alliston. Lady Hester made the best of it, she always made the best of things, gave them the cottage and went abroad. She was a handsome woman still, even in middle age, and soft-mannered, with a charm for all sorts of people. The other sex was conscious of it even yet. Lately, in letters from Mentone, there had been mention of "a dear simple-minded man, a millionaire from the Argentine, who is not learned but anxious to bathe his naturally refined soul in the right sort of companionship. We have become great friends, and I have talked to him so much about your children, dearest. He could do a great deal for them." Linda knew the signs and shuddered. Then before her vision there came the figure of Aline Fingal. "On Saturday she will come; what a rest it is to think of her—"

Suddenly a sound caught her ear, the clanging of the farm gate at the front of the house, she could hear it sometimes; and the ringing of the door-bell—it had a deep tone that made its sound like a tradition. "Aline

is not coming to-day," she thought; "perhaps it is some one to ask if the rooms are let." People came occasionally, and a sense of satisfaction always possessed her for a little while when they were refused, and she knew herself safe in her refuge. She heard voices on the stairs and footsteps—she held her breath, and sat listening. There was a moment's hesitation outside the door before Mrs. Kitson, the farmer's wife, entered. She held a card in her hand. "There's a lady," she said, "come in a motor and wants to see you."

Linda read the name, an exclamation escaped her lips; she rose to her feet and, crossing the room, stood leaning against the piano. Her eyes flashed with amazement and anger.

"I can't see her," she said; "tell her to go away."

There was a little sound outside. "Oh, do see me, please," and the speaker entered.

The farmer's wife went out and shut the door, leaving them together.

"This is an outrage; how could you come?"

"It took courage." The voice was clear and reckless, suggestive of laughter. "Praise that, if there's nothing else that's right." She held out her hands, but Linda drew back. "Look here, don't let's be theatrical—I get enough of that; we are two women and we are sensible, and I should think you'd know I couldn't have come if it were anything disagreeable—or to be unkind." The tone and manner were common, but they were natural and human.

"What do you want?"

"Mayn't I sit down?" The motor-coat was opened and thrown aside, the veil unwound that had enveloped the head. Linda, staring at her, saw that she was young and pretty, with red lips and a soft complexion—art as well as nature had some knowledge of them—and masses of fair hair that showed beneath the small fur-trimmed hat. She was about four-and-twenty, round, not plump, had evidently fed well and drank well and lived in comfortable surroundings: a strange contrast to the pale and emaciated girl shrinking against the piano, with a passionate protest flashing from her eyes.

For a moment they looked at each other. "What have you come for?" Linda asked, stupefied with astonishment at the insult of the visit. "How could you dare——"

"Well, really, I don't know how I did. But it's no good beating about the bush, is it? so I'll tell you——"

"Does he know?"

"Not a bit. Hasn't the least idea. I found out where you were from Albery Wynne, the throat doctor. He has been looking after me. Dick would be pretty furious if he knew—he can let one have it if he tries. It's just this——" She stopped to gather courage: "Your face has haunted me ever since I saw you in court, the day of the case—didn't know I was there, did you? I was hidden away at the back? You mayn't believe it, but I felt a thorough beast—it isn't my fault as much as you think, for I give you my word, two months before—and the case was coming on then—I didn't know he was married, hadn't an idea of it."

"He didn't tell you?"

"Not a word, and no one else did. They are always pretty shy of speaking of their people to my sort. I had seen a good deal of him in London, too, but he didn't care a snap about me then; you had tucked yourself away in the country, and he was going on pretty rapid with Lady Donnet—she didn't care for him, and I did. He never looked at me all that time, I swear he didn't. Then I went off to Paris with Violet Horton. She was a queer lot, though she was somebody, I suppose. We had a great lark there till her husband—Tommy Horton, you know—and Dick dropped down on us. Tommy took her off pretty quickly, and I got my chance and fastened on to Dick. I am speaking quite straight. I pretended I didn't care a chip for him, but I did all I knew to get him—I own that. He and I stayed behind and had a lovely time. But I never dreamt of you." She spoke quickly, her manner changed and it was impossible not to believe her. A cloud went over the pretty pink-and-white face. She was almost distressed. "If I had known, I would have died first. I don't mind treating a man badly—what's he for? Don't they pay

us out? But a woman—well, I never did that before. I never would—it's where I draw the line—and it's cut pretty deep into me, I can tell you, though he's just the world to me now—same as he was to you perhaps? I believe I'd die for him—and without any fuss—same as you—" she added under her breath and stopped aghast. But Linda made no sound, only stood staring at her, half dazed. "You see, Dick's the sort of man one can't keep long—that's what's the matter with him. I expect he was longest with you—you had the best of him. But once he has got a woman he is tired of her in no time. Lots of men are like that. And they are not as bad as they look. They can't help it. They are like bees that go along from flower to flower in a garden. And they like the sort that doesn't worry, but takes it easy."

"What have you come for?"

"Well, I'm telling you, but I can't think how I am going to get it all out. I want you to know that I am not as bad as you think. I heard about you from Albery Wynne, and it cut me. I want you to forgive me if you can. I haven't done you as much harm as it looks, for if it hadn't been me it might have been somebody else—so what does it matter? But it will finish me up if he chucks me—and he will. I know that. I daren't think of it. I own it—it's no good lying. I just dread losing him altogether, though it may not hurt me as much as it does you, for I've got the excitement of the theatre, and one can't have it all ways. He likes money, too—at least he likes what it does. He hasn't taken any of mine—won't touch it—but he hasn't much of his own now, and he spends pretty freely, and when his is all gone he can come on me."

"He never will."

"Well, anyway, I can make heaps, and if he chooses it will be there for him. That's one way I've got the pull on you. But," with a sudden rush of passion, "I wouldn't have done it if I'd known. I swear I wouldn't. I would have cut off my right hand first—and my foot too for that matter. Then I should never have danced again, and been no good."

"Is he going to marry you?"

"Don't know. Depends a good deal on whether I'll marry him." Some subtle change in her voice betrayed that she was lying, but Linda was too dazed to discern it. "It's a big step is marriage. Don't know whether I dare risk it. One side is pretty sure to get tired of it, and it might be me, though I don't think it would. Two months yet before the decree is made absolute, so there's plenty of time." She considered for a moment, then went on with a little burst. "I know it's pretty bad of me to come, but I had to. I was awfully taken aback after I had seen Albergy Wynne—he isn't a man to mince matters any more than Dick. I am awfully gone on Dick—awfully. If he married me, and left me as he did you, I believe I should go out of my mind. I didn't let him know that I cared about him for a long time, but I expect he knows pretty well now. . . . I'm going mad for him, and I can't help it, so that's the truth. And what I have thought is that if I married him I might keep him if I had your kiddies——"

"If *you* had them!" Linda turned on her fierce and breathless. "I would rather see them lying dead. . . . Has he spoken of them?" she asked with a sudden drop.

The woman nodded. "Not to me, but he has to others. That's how I know. He only cursed me—once when I tried to talk of them. You see, he hasn't forgiven me for landing him in court, though it wasn't my fault, there were such a lot of people about telling tales, and not minding their own business."

"Does he know anything about me?"

She nodded again. "I hear he is awfully cut up at your being ill. He went to Albergy Wynne too, not when I did, but he is a friend of his—brother of the doctor who lives here—and asked all about you."

The face that had become white and rigid looked up. "Then he knows—but it isn't true—the doctor is wrong—I am stronger than he thinks. I mean to get well." The voice was dogged and determined.

"Well, I hope so, of course I just do." There was passionate truth in the words. "For one thing if you don't, I should feel that it was through me, though it

isn't—that is, all of it. But—well, look here, we never know what is before us, and what I want to say is this—” Her voice had become soft and urging, her eyes had grown tender; she reached out her hands for a moment, almost as an entreaty. “If anything did happen—one never knows, of course—the doctor says there isn't any one belonging to you except Lady Gilston, or some name like that, and she's got her own lot to look after—and your mother, but I heard that your mother's no good—gone off to Italy or somewhere—isn't the sort to want kids to look after. Well—if anything does go wrong—I heard you were anxious about them.”

Linda's hand went up to her throat, her breathing came quick and short, her eyes were fastened on the woman before her, but to speak was impossible.

“I'd do everything for them,” she went on; “I'd marry him; and I believe I could keep him—if I had them. I'd bring them up just as you'd like, and so would he—I'd make him—and I'd love them. I'd love them as if they were my own, and I'll never have any whether I marry or not—you had better know that—never can. I'm making heaps of money. I've got a good bit put out. A friend of mine did it awfully well for me, and I'd settle it all on them. They shouldn't go on the stage. And I'd take care they didn't do as I've done. They should be brought up lady and gentleman—the boy should go to college—they should go abroad, and I'd do everything for them. Don't you see, they've Dick's life in them, the best of it, the part you had. I've only got the dregs of him, I've only had dregs all my life. Money and all is only dregs when it comes in the way it does to me.”

“I want you to go away,” so quiet a voice said it that it almost startled the listener. “They are my children—mine, not his any longer—mine, and in that way he is mine still—the rest is yours. I'm glad I've seen you, that you didn't know, but—I don't want to say it with any arrogance—but he and you and all that has happened, and all the things with which you are concerned, belong to some other world than the one I have come to know about lately—I am journeying on in it.”

She did not understand. "But—if anything happened—I don't want to frighten you, but you never know—" she stopped. "I mean about the children."

"I shall keep them. Living or dead, I will keep them."

"You can't keep them if——"

"I will."

"Well!" It was the other woman who staggered back this time, for the tone made her feel that it was true . . . that they were standing in different worlds, and speaking across the distance between. "But I'd like to do something to—isn't there anything you want?" It was almost an entreaty.

"I want you to go away. Marry him if you like, but go—I want you to go. If there's any reparation you are trying to make, let it take the form of vanishing completely from me and mine."

"Well!" in a lower tone, "I am sorry. I thought perhaps you'd see it—I meant to do what I could."

"Yes, I see it; and you are better than I thought."

The woman stood still for a moment, then went a step towards the door and stopped. "Just say that you forgive me. I dare say you don't really, but I'd like to hear you say it."

"Oh yes," with a tragic weariness that smote her visitor, "I forgive you. But please go."

"I will." She turned away, then stopped. "Look here, perhaps we're both wound up a bit now, but if you think better of it I'll do all I've said; and they'd get him then, you know. And I'm not—not such a beast as you've thought me. I'd do everything I could for them. I believe I'd love them so much they'd make me different." The tears came into her eyes.

"Thank you," Linda said; and once more she repeated, this time very gently, "But I want you to go away. I don't wish to hurt you, but I can't bear it any longer. I entreat you to go."

"All right," in an almost frightened voice, "I'm off." She gathered up the motor-coat and the veil, cast one look back, a bewildered, baffled look at the room, and disappeared. The stairs creaked as her feet touched them.

Linda stood listening, clasping her head with her hands. The door had been left open. Downstairs the woman was putting on her coat and veil—she spoke to some one who saw her out. . . . She heard the chauffeur set the machine going—she heard it start, and went out to a landing at the front of the house, whence she could see the road. . . . The motor was already beyond the farm gate, through a cloud of dust that rose as if to hide it she could just see it speeding away. In a moment it had vanished. . . . The farmer's wife was in the hall."

"Do you know where the children are?" Linda asked.

And the answer came, "They've gone to see the cows milked. They'll be in directly."

She went back to the room and opened the window, wider still, as if to change the atmosphere, then sat down on the basket-chair that had many cushions, and leaning her arms on the deep ledge looked out—she was trembling—breathless, only half-alive. The scent of violets came up to her. She saw the whiteness of the snowdrops—they were nearly over—the lilac bush by the hedge waiting for the spring, and the trees that seemed to be holding out their brown arms inviting it. But to all this she was insensible; her whole being was merged in a prayer, an entreaty, her lips moved to it, though no sound came from them—"Let me live, dear Heaven, let me live!" The sunlight suddenly found her eyes and blinded her, though she welcomed its warmth. She hid her face in her hands, resting them on the window cushion, and prayed to heaven—to the sun—to anything that was divine—always the same prayer—"O God, let me live—let me live!" till the intensity of it seemed to bring unseen presences round her. They gathered nearer and nearer—she felt the touch of their intangible hands—she knew they were bending over her; with some strange second consciousness she could see the way—the road along which they had come, the boundary of a world that was, and is, and is to be. . . .

The prayer died down from her silent lips into her heart . . . the room was empty again, and very still—

but she was afraid to move, to raise her head. She felt as if she had seen the road that leads from life to death, from death to life—knowing that soon she would be a fugitive, seeking shelter, looking back at the world, wringing her hands . . . and the children—the children!

Then through the distance, from beyond the hedge at the garden gate, on their way from the outbuildings, past the high trees, she heard Janet singing. She raised her head and listened—they were coming—they had seen the cows milked—there was a little pause as if they had halted—then a voice that was sweet and true went on—

“Wha’ll buy my caller herrin’?
They’re bonnie fish and halesome farin’;
Buy my caller herrin’,
New-drawn frae the Forth.”

The beating of a child’s drum, with a first sense of time—it was wonderful to hear it—and they came in sight, the red-haired Scots girl carrying the baby, and the little fair-haired boy walking close to her skirt, a toy drum slung round his shoulder and a stick in either hand. The shifting sunlight fell on them as they came through the gate.

“Oh, to live—to live,” moaned the watcher at the window. “Dear God, give me any agony you will, but let me stay with them.” She reached out her hands, waited and grew calm; for the comfort of knowledge she could not identify stole over her, and soothed her, and gave her peace.

XVIII.

THE car went swiftly along the lane. The woman in it sat very still.

"I wish I hadn't gone," she thought as it turned into the road beside the common. "I expect I haven't done her any good—with that cough too. I wish I hadn't seen her. I'll never forget it. But I'm mad about Dick—that's about it—and I don't know why. There are lots of better men. Can't think how I could be such a fool to be caught like this—but I am—" She looked up quickly; there were people running along the road, hurrying across the common. By the 'White Hart' an excited crowd had gathered, that reached to the corner near the station. "Just stop and ask what's up, Peters," she said to the chauffeur. She leant forward to hear.

"Accident on the line."

The crowd separated, and through it came some men carrying a form on a stretcher; they disappeared with it into the hotel. The windows of the room on the first floor were opened wide a minute later, and the people looked up as if they knew whither the carriers had taken the body on the stretcher. "Oh no, she isn't dead," one of them said, "I saw her hand as they went in the doorway—it wasn't a dead one."

"It's the lady that's been staying there. I've seen her about."

"Lucky there was a doctor in the train, and he wasn't hurt."

"That's why Dr. Wynne's able to go in and look after her at once."

He came out a minute later, and looked round as if for a messenger, and his gaze rested on the motor and the

face framed by the open window. She smiled at him, a pathetic, beckoning smile.

He went up to her and, wondering who she was, he saw the blue eyes and red lips, and the lovely golden hair pulled across her forehead; the head was covered by a little velvet cap edged with fur—she had been too agitated on leaving Highbrook Farm to put on the swathing motor-veil again.

"Can I be of any use—or the car?" she asked.

"You are very kind—" he hesitated.

"I think you are a brother of Dr. Albergy Wynne—I'm one of his patients—can I do anything to help?"

He looked at her doubtfully, but there was no time to waste. "Are you going back to London?"

"Yes—now—but I could wait, or go anywhere—or do anything there. I'd like to be useful."

"I think we have met—" He was not making any mistake about her now.

"Cissie Repton."

"Ah—Cherry Ripe." He smiled.

"That's it," she answered quickly.

"Strange you should be at Leesbury," he said, half to himself. "We've telegraphed to London already for a surgeon and nurses, and an ambulance is on its way from Amersham."

"Is she dead—that one you carried in, I mean?"

"No, but a good deal hurt—bad concussion. I don't expect she'll recover consciousness just yet. By the way, there's one thing you might do if you are going up to London."

"Yes?" eagerly.

"They don't seem to know anything about her here, except that she lives in Bedford Square—she's a Miss Fingal. We have telegraphed there, to the servants, but if you could call and explain more fully what has happened?"

"I'll go, right away," she answered quickly.

He smiled. "I think you are busy every evening?"

"Yes, but my turn doesn't come on till ten o'clock, so there's lots of time. Isn't there anything else I can do?"

"No, I think not—very good of you—" All the time he was feasting his eyes on her face: for man is only human and not blind—even when he is a doctor with a railway catastrophe in hand.

"Just tell me," she said, "was it pretty bad up at the station—what happened?"

"A signalman's mistake, I understand, the fast train overtook an ordinary one."

"Jumped over it?"

"Yes, jumped over it, as you say, and there are a good many hurt. Luckily, the end of the train was pretty empty." He moved back from the car.

She took it as a hint to go. The crowd that had played audience, though at a respectful distance, made way for it to start. "Well, look here, doctor, if any one's hurt that's very poor, just let me know, and I'll send a cheque along. Your brother's been awfully kind to me."

"Glad to hear it. He's a good chap." He shook her hand; he couldn't resist giving the fingers a little squeeze. "Shall I tell the chauffeur to go straight to Bedford Square?"

She answered with a nod and a smiling—not too smiling—glance. He gave the direction, and the car moved on.

"Well, this is a queer show," she thought. "I wonder why I should come on it, and why there should be such bad luck about—what's the use of it? That's the sort of thing Dick used to wonder—Dick! . . . Oh, my little sister Ann, but I'd give the world to see him and feel him kissing me again. He's a precious queer lot, and I expect that's why I'm such a fool about him, for I wouldn't mind doing a month in hell if I might have him for a week out of it." She leant her head against the padded side of the car. "It's rotten luck caring about any one like this." She shut her eyes and struggled to get calm. "I wish I hadn't seen her to-day. She'll haunt me all the time after I hear she's dead. . . . I was a beast, for I only did it to pay him off for not caring at first—and I don't believe he did, even at last—and I have been caught like

this." . . . Her thoughts drifted away, till she saw in a waking dream two children picking strawberries in a country garden, and a woman with an apron over her arm watching them. "No use, I couldn't have done it, I should have died of that game," she said. "Things were different in mother's time, but 'tisn't any good being alive now unless you live. And I mustn't take on, or I shall be looking old, and then it will be all up with me."

There were long ladders before the house in Bedford Square.

"Doing it up," she said to herself. "I wonder who she is—perhaps she's a rich old maid. He didn't say she was a girl, and she wouldn't have been staying there alone if she had been."

Stimson came to the door, obviously trying to hide the fact that he was agitated. He gathered quickly why she had come. It was a great relief, they had been much upset by the telegram. He was just getting ready to go to Leesbury by the 6.30. Miss Fingal was a lady who lived alone; but he had telegraphed to her lawyer, Mr. Bendish.

"Why didn't you telephone?" she asked quickly.

"We haven't one in the house, never had," he answered with dignity.

"Is she young or old? No telephone sounds pretty old-fashioned, doesn't it?"

"She's not old, ma'am." He resented her manner, and showed it. "But she's a lady who doesn't care for—some things."

"I see. Rather slow? Well, I hope you'll find her alive anyhow." She turned away.

Stimson, who prided himself on never forgetting what was due to people, followed her to the car. "Who shall I say called, ma'am?" he asked.

"There isn't any one to say it to, is there?"

"There's Mr. Bendish, ma'am—and Sir James Gilston will have to know." He thought it as well to show her that Miss Fingal had important friends.

"Sir James Gilston? Why, I've just been to see his cousin, or whatever she is—Mrs. Alliston at Leesbury,

so you can tell him Miss Cissie Repton. And say 'Home' to the chauffeur."

The devil had entered into her, and she couldn't resist this parting bombshell. It was one, even to Stimson, for he remembered the divorce suit, and knew the details of it well enough; in his astonishment he stood still on the wide pavement and watched the car out of sight, as if he were afraid of its returning to contaminate the highly sedate square in which he lived.

But Cherry Ripe was reckless. She felt that she wanted to shock or hurt some one—any one, it didn't matter whom—to compensate herself for the tragedy of the afternoon: it had shocked and hurt her, and she was desperately trying to shed her pain.

She lived close to Victoria—in Carlisle Mansions—on the ground floor, even with the street. "I don't see myself staircasing, or going up in a lift when I come home at night," she had told the agent, "and I don't want my friends stared at, or taken stock of. They'll be able to slip in and out if I'm on the even." The flat was fairly large, and crowded with expensive furniture that worried her a good deal. "I don't see the use of all these things. They don't do me any good," she said to herself sometimes. "I only feel as if I was acting among them, not as if I was living with them, and I wish now I had gone up to the top, there's a lift to it. I seem to feel the weight of all these floors on my head when I'm in the blues." She felt it tonight after the visit to Bedford Square. "Twenty to ten as usual," she told the chauffeur, as she let herself in with a latch-key. An elderly maid came forward to meet her. "It's all right, Lydia," she said. "Don't bother me about food. I'm going to lie down till it's time to go." She hurried to her room and shut the door.

XIX.

THREE hours later she was delighting her audience with her fresh face, her innocent voice, and the pretty lisping suggestiveness of the words she sang with a bewildered air as if she really didn't understand them. She was encored of course, and came forward and sang another verse, and danced a few steps, and panted after them: "Mustn't get fat," she thought, "it would be deadly." They encored again, and suddenly she remembered a song about mother and bees and lavender that a man at the beginning of her career had written for her as a joke, telling her that it went with her face. It reminded her of the afternoon, and the waking dream of the home that no longer existed. She looked up with a little laugh, and sang it through without any accompaniment from the surprised orchestra. The last verse ran:—

"And I want to go home to my mother, I do—I do;

I want to go back to the nest.

You may think it all rot, but the little white cot

Is the shelter that I love best—I do-o, I do-oo!"

They laughed and applauded, and took it as an excellent joke, all but a few who thought it "lovely," and felt sentimental. She stood still for a minute by the wing, enjoying her triumph, looking at the inane faces in the stalls; she could see them dimly over the footlights, and through the mist of cigarette smoke and human breath. "It's all lies," she laughed at them and waved her hand. "I wouldn't leave you for the world. Besides, it isn't there!" It was an excellent joke: they enjoyed it immensely.

She went on to Nevine's, the newest night club. Cyril Batson was waiting for her; and there was no one else to-night whom she could hurt. She still wanted to hurt some one, to do something desperate, and didn't know what or why: the perpetual air of innocence she did not possess, of happiness that was her great asset and yet unreal, was driving her mad.

Cyril Batson had been running after her lately, sending her flowers, or anything else that was not expensive, or he could get on credit. She despised him, and showed it. The odd thing was that he was not really in love with her, he only wanted to be: he felt that it would assure him he was really a poet. He loved passionate and beautiful language; he wanted to write it; but the fire refused to burn: so many things interested him and he liked adventure; he was amused even at his own absurdity—for he recognised it, and it was all fatal to his being a poet. The worst of it was he couldn't see what else he could be and get the same satisfactions—so he waited for something to turn up. Meanwhile he played his part as best he could, and dangled after Cissie Repton: poets always had a great passion, and usually a hopeless one; he tried to force one for her.

"I thought you'd be here," she said with pleasant contempt when she found him outside her dressing-room at the theatre, ready to take her on to the club. "I don't know why I'm going, except that I'm hungry—have you got a table?"

This was when they were in the car—her car.

"Of course." He put his hand on her shoulder.

"Leave me alone," she flashed. He was not the right man: she wanted no other to-night.

Nevine's was only a few minutes off; cars and taxis were arriving—almost stealthily, as if they were ashamed of themselves or their drivers were reluctant, though the occupants were not. There was nothing to be seen outside, merely a dark building and no lamp. Beyond a swing door was a small dim vestibule, in which a hall porter stood and scrutinised the face of each arrival, produced a book to be signed, and then opened a wide

baize-covered door that led to a corridor, covered with soft carpet, illuminated by shaded lamps, decorated in white and gold, with a wide red rail, from which hung pictures in black-and-white, drawings and etchings mostly, and photographs of artistic celebrities. Sounds of music and laughter, and the subdued clatter incidental to entertainment of any sort, came from an open doorway beyond; occasionally dancers flitted across the aperture.

The big room was full; supper was going on at most of the tables, which were sufficiently far apart to admit of a couple waltzing between them. At the end, on a raised stage, an Algerian band was playing a slow waltz. The musicians wore a strange uniform, that seemed to have been made up of haphazard garments, and fezes with high crimson-and-blue brushes to them. Occasionally they broke out into what sounded like a barbaric chant, but the conductor, a strange slightly deformed figure, in blue and red, with wide splashes of dull and dirty gold braid, energetically subdued the voices and instruments when they interfered too much with other sounds that were characteristic of the place.

They looked round, she eagerly, he with curiosity, for he had only seen it once before; it was an extravagance he could not afford, and no credit was given. Luckily its ways did not appeal to him. Dick Alliston had taken him the first time, soon after it was started, and said, "It is beastly, but you will have seen it, and all experience is worth having, though only a fool buys the wrong sort twice." Cyril Batson had not ventured again, for he might be an ass, but he was not vicious, actually at any rate, and in imagination only as part of what he took to be his stock-in-trade as a poet.

"Well," she asked, "what are you thinking of? Haven't you been here before?"

"Of course," he answered in what he meant to be a sophisticated manner.

"I don't believe you, Bat. You are always trying to live up to something that isn't yourself, and longing for —what you won't get."

"Don't say it is impossible," he whispered, and tried

to get into a thrilling mood; but it wouldn't come. . . . "There's Lady Alton over there. I wonder what Alton thinks of it. I heard they didn't get on. What shall we do? Will you have some supper at once?"

"I want to talk to Lily Floxon first; I always want to speak to a woman in a place of this sort. There's Lord Stockton over there. He's going to be married soon. Go and ask him what he thinks of it." She looked up at him with laughing eyes that showed no sign of the ache beneath them: "You can come back in five minutes." She sat down by a woman who seemed to be alone, a plain woman, oddly out of place in her surroundings, not very young, and evidently not much amused.

"What have you come here for, Lily?" she asked. "This isn't your sort of show."

"Gilbert brought me."

"Funny to come with your husband—takes the cake."

"He is writing a series of articles on night clubs."

"He would know more about them if he brought somebody else. How do you do?" as the journalist came up to her. Cherry Ripe's black velvet frock and flashing diamonds and the beautiful colouring of her hair and complexion were drawing many long looks towards her. He felt that it was the right thing to be seen speaking to her.

"I hear the new song is a great success," he said, as if it were an event.

"I dare say, but there isn't much to it." The voice was husky, but she smiled and looked pleased.

"Do you dance with it?"

"I move my feet."

"And they are so adorable." He went on to speak to some one else who beckoned him.

"He has never seen them; lying comes natural to men, doesn't it?" she said to his wife.

Mrs. Floxon knew the signs; she had been in musical comedy in the provinces before her marriage, and not a success. "My dear," she said, "something is wrong with you. What's up?"

"Nothing's up. Everything's down, that's all."

"How is Dick Alliston?" significantly.

"He's all right, I suppose. I don't trouble myself too much about him—or any one else. There's Celia Berrymore over there. If I were an aristocrat I'd behave like one; she was carried out the other night. Can't think what her game is, coming here—it's no good to her anyway. I wonder what she is like when she's with her relations in Scotland. I was on a yacht last year going up the loch by her uncle's castle—it's a splendid place—they were all having tea at the chaplain's cottage right on the shore. I picked her out——"

"What were you doing there?" That sort of thing had never happened to Lily in her professional days.

"Staying with a man who has a house down at the other end—a rich cotton man. Dick came and fetched me out of it—sort of thing he did—does——" she corrected herself.

"I saw Lady Celia B. dining with him at the Berkeley a few days ago."

"Doesn't matter a row of pins. He never takes on with that sort of truck—likes the genuine article better; she and her set can stand about in tableaux and go as naked as they please. They only let themselves down and prop us up."

"Is he all right?" Mrs. Floxon asked again.

"I suppose so. I haven't seen him the last half-hour, couldn't be bothered. He's too mad. Cyril Batson brought me on to-night—he's the poet——"

"Gilbert knows him. He hasn't a penny. He told Gilbert that his aunt—she's very rich and lives in Queen's Gate—wants him to marry an heiress. She had him down to her place in the country near Wavercombe, and took him to see one who lives in a cottage Dick Alliston had once."

"I must ask him about her—look here, he's waiting for me and I want my supper." She turned a radiant face towards Cyril Batson: it enchanted him, for she had seemed bored with him before. "I am very hungry, Bat, dear," she said, going past Mrs. Floxon as if she had no further use for her, "and you must give me a

long drink—in a pint pot.” They sat down side by side at their table. “Why did you take one so near the Berrymore trollop?” she asked.

“Do you mind?”

“I hate her—I wonder if this is fit to eat,” as a plate was put down to her.

“Why do you hate her?”

“Just for exercise. A bit of hate keeps one alive when you don’t want to be bothered with the other thing. But anyway if I’d been her sort I would have been what she is not.”

“But you are—lots that she isn’t. I never saw any one like you.” He stooped and kissed the back of her arm. “You ought to have been a goddess.”

“Don’t be a fool, Cyril. I’m tired of all that—sick of love-making. I believe I’d behave best to a man who beat me.”

“I want to take you right away from these surroundings.” His voice was genuine, and his thin, rather foolish face became interesting with emotion that was real—for her beauty had its effect upon him. He was glad, and tried to realise it more acutely. “You were made for better things—you have strayed from them; I want to take you back, to see your feet treading grass under a blue sky to the sound of running water——”

“I shall go mad if you talk your trash to me,” she broke out. “You had better try it on the Berrymore. She can take you into the smart lot, and they’ll buy your books—I wouldn’t be found dead with them—and she’s the sort who’ll go and hear you at the poetry shop, while a tallow candle gutters in front of you. . . . There’s Lord Stockton looking. I’m going to make him take me home—I don’t mind if I dance round once with you. Your step is all right, and I don’t want to be too beastly to you.”

“But you are—cruel to me!” Beastly was not a word he used. “Why did you let me bring you if you were not going to be kind? I believe you only did it to vex Alliston—if you see him still.”

“Of course I see him still,” she answered quickly; but he knew it to be a lie—a flimsy domino of a lie, “and

nothing vexes him. Who's the heiress your aunt took you to see?" she asked, when she had finished her supper and was looking restlessly round the room as if seeking some one.

"What do you know about her?"

"I heard." She breathed freely, for Dick Alliston was not there, she had assured herself of that: she had not expected to see him, but she entered no place now without wondering whether some chance might not bring him there too. She laughed and looked up at her companion; and he, fascinated by her sudden change of mood, forgot his desire for emotion that was genuine and played moth to her candle. "I always hear things. She lives in Dick Alliston's old cottage, doesn't she?"

"Yes, but he does not know Miss Fingal."

"Fingal? Oh yes." In a moment she saw the whole connection—Miss Fingal and Dick's wife, and they knew each other, of course. "Well, your heiress was in a train smash to-day, and I'm not sure that she is not done for——"

"Poor little thing! I liked her; she looked so lonely."

"We're all lonely, Bat, in different ways; but we have to put up with it, so that's nothing. There's Stockton waiting. He wants to talk to me, and I don't feel like dancing any more to-night. I'm tired. I seem to be mixed up with the Alliston lot to-day, for he's a cousin or something of hers. I wish you would leave me alone now. I'm very tired—and tired of you. I don't want you any more to-night."

"Let's do one turn together; you said you would." He longed for the sensation of holding her in his arms.

"I've changed my mind." She beckoned to Lord Stockton. "Will you take me home?" she asked him. "My chauffeur was crying because his child had croup, so I sent him back to it; and I've had enough of Cyril Batson."

"I'll take you if you like." He looked severely at her low-cut dress, and at the diamonds round her neck: he

knew the man who owed for them. "But you must come now. I don't want to stay here any longer." He followed her to the cloak-room door. She came out in a coat of heavy brocade with a gold thread running through it, and fur close round the throat so that it framed her face. It made her look picturesque, and she knew it; but his eyes only surveyed her severely again, and there was no sign of admiration.

She hesitated before the car, piqued by his manner. "Look here, are you sure you want to go?" she asked.

"Yes." He got in after her and shut the door. "I couldn't have stayed in that place another minute," he said, as they whirled off. "Why do you go there?"

"It's life."

"It's hell."

"Same thing for some of us when the switch is turned on. Why did you go?"

"To see if I could persuade women like you to stay away."

"Are you going to talk religion to me?"

"No, only decency."

She looked up at him with an appeal in her eyes, and put her hand on his arm. "Don't worry me, Teddy. I'm miserable enough to stay in any hell except the one that's ahead of me."

He was suddenly interested, but he shook her hand off his arm, firmly though not unkindly. "But why? You have everything your own way, money and applause, and a score of men running after you; most of them poor young fools—but there they are."

"Doesn't matter if you have a hundred if the right sort doesn't play up. That's generally a woman's luck. She can get any but the right one."

He looked at her and was silent a minute, then his tone grew different. "You ought to have married," he said; "some good fellow who would keep you in order and give you children."

"I'm fit for that sort of thing, ain't I?"

"Not now, but you were once."

"Oh, I say, you are preaching—and I can't bear it."

If you go on with it I shall open the door and jump out."

He touched her hand then. "I don't preach," he said, "and I wish you'd come and have tea to-morrow at my rooms in Lincoln's Inn."

"Come to tea?" She stared at him doubtfully.

"The woman I am going to marry is coming. I think it would do you good to meet her. She has tenderness for all humanity."

She laughed out at that. "Can't do it, Teddy, can't do it."

"Look here," he said, "you must call me Lord Stockton. I dislike the other."

"Do you think she wouldn't like it? Don't be afraid, I won't let it slip out unawares when she's there." She laughed, and turned her face towards him. He saw her prettiness, the innocent expression, the suggestion of unnecessary get up; and with it all he heard the note of strain in her voice—sweet alluring voice that the stalls loved—as if she were doggedly beating off threatened pain, though it had no outward effect on her.

"I am not afraid of that, nor of anything you can do or say," he answered, "but it grieves me when——"

"Oh, I know all the rest, so stow it! Here we are." He helped her out, looked up at the high houses, and followed her into the hall. "I took care to be on the level," she explained. "No stairs to go up, or lift-man to look at you; come in, and we'll have a talk."

She had opened her front door while she spoke with a key from the gold bag on her arm.

"No!" he snapped.

She laughed out again at his evident misunderstanding. "I thought you would like to—to hear"—there was a little catch in her throat that arrested him—"to hear about Mrs. Alliston. I went to see her to-day."

"You—you did? Where?" He was astounded.

"That's it, I did. She's at Leesbury; so's her friend, Miss Fingal—at the hotel, but she's pretty well done for in a railway accident—Miss Fingal, I mean. Good-night."

"But tell me why you went——"

"Not now. I'm too tired to bother any more with you—so trot along; and I don't want to go to your tea-party to-morrow." She entered quickly, and left him staring at the closed door.

"Think I had the best of that," she thought. She turned on the light and drank a glass of milk Lydia had put ready for her.

PART II.

I.

At the end of a month Miss Fingal was still tossing uneasily on her pillows at the White Hart. She had broken no bones in the railway accident, but she was seriously hurt about the head, she had wrenched various muscles, and was suffering from shock. For days she was unconscious, and her recovery seemed unlikely; life and death gambled for her and fever rioted in her brain. But the worst was over. At first her ravings had been of places she had never seen, of people she had never known—of the dead who had lived in Bedford Square before uncle John's time—strange men and women came and looked at her; the dark man, whose portrait hung in the study stalked up to her bedside, with a stern face and threatening eyes, and frightened her so much that she fled to the flat at Battersea, but the door was locked and she rang the bell in vain.

"It's so cruel," she cried to the young couple, for she could hear them laughing. "I must drown if you won't let me in." But they took no notice. She hurried down the stairs, out to the park opposite—the park she had never entered—and ran towards the lake, but when she came to it rats were swimming in it, thousands and thousands of rats . . . she went to the cottage, but it was locked and empty—round the garden to the orchard, but she could find no way into it. She tore down the barbed wire with her hands, but more and more it entangled itself before her, till, broken and bleeding, she

found herself in Bedford Square. . . . The tall white vases at the end of the drawing-room slowly moved—she saw that they were dead women swathed in their shrouds—they came towards her, holding out their ghostly hands; she cowered and moaned before them, too much affrighted to resist, and, closing her eyes so as not to see them, felt as if, in a merciful cloud that fell about her, she had met with sleep: it folded her in, and for a time the fever in her brain had exhausted itself. . . . But it was not over, though her imagining changed. Once it was almost more than her strength could bear. She was in a carriage, on a long straight road that had tall poplar-trees on either side, driving a pair of horses, lashing to make them go faster—faster—for behind her a train was coming, on and on—she crouched down behind the splash-board, still holding the reins, crying, “It is death—it is death!” But the train went by, not touching her. The carriage stopped, and suddenly there were houses piled up; till they resembled a mountain, with an old abbey that crowned them; and at their feet was the sea. The tide was coming in—coming towards her over green fields—nearer and nearer—higher and higher,—she was going to drown—to drown—the waves were closing round her—over her—she was choking—she could not breathe—a tight band clutched her head, a weight was on her chest holding her down, her limbs were rigid; a stone was at her lips, an icy hand held it there; with a struggle she moved it away, and suddenly rising from the pillow she held out her arms and crying, “Yes, the children—the children!” fell back on the pillow. . . . The hand found her again; it seemed to caress her. “Oh, I cannot go—I am afraid!” she said, entreating. . . . there was a pause; her voice became different. “If they love me—” she said wearily. . . . She grew calmer for a little while, till a shivering, shuddering cold was upon her, an aching crippling tiredness. A cruel wind carried her out in the gathering blackness towards another road, a road that dizzily she seemed to know; she wanted to stay and identify it—there were trees overhead, and a green bank by the wayside. She saw it through the darkness, and longed

to rest; she heard voices, and was afraid; she felt cold—and strange and tried to hide, but fear and a sense of seeking urged her on again . . . she seemed to remember herself, and the hotel, and in an agony of despair cried out her own name—a strange thing to do, the nurse said; but afterwards she was quieted, as if worn out with long suffering and effort. . . .

At last a morning came when gradually a sense of surroundings dawned on her, though she was afraid to open her eyes or to make a sign. She knew that a strong arm held her and a cup was put to the lips she could hardly move, but the worn life took in strength to go on. . . .

The world that had once taken little count of Miss Fingal did not leave her out of its reckoning while she was at her worst. Stimson and Mrs. Turner presented themselves twice, only to be told that it was impossible for either of them to see her; but they had lived too long with "the family" not to be full of anxiety. Upon them, too, fell much of the responsibility of directing the workmen and choosing the wall-paper for the staircase. The result was a gay chintz-like pattern of excellent design that seemed to carry an echo of happiness in its colours. This was through Stimson, for on his third visit the nurse allowed him to stand by the bedside for a minute or two while the patient was uneasily sleeping. Her face looked young, and a smile broke over it: she awoke and looked up at him with eyes that were full of a wild light, but had no recognition in them. "Don't you know me, miss?" he asked. "We have all of us been dreadfully upset about you. We hope you will soon be quite well and come home again," he said tremulously, "for we don't like to think of you here—though it's very comfortable, I am sure," he added, to conciliate the nurse.

She comprehended nothing; but he remembered, while he stood by her, how pleased she had been with the cottage. He had heard that Mr. and Mrs. Alliston chose the staircase paper there, and he went away determined to order one like it. "It'll make the whole place cheerful," he told Mrs. Turner. "In fact,

come to think of it, we had better make the alterations everywhere as much like the cottage as we can—so far as they are left to us, that is, for we know she liked that, and I dare say Mrs. Bendish will approve when we tell her.”

For Mrs. Bendish, at her husband’s suggestion, had helped to arrange where electric plugs and switches should be put, and Stimson had seen her shudder once or twice as she entered the gloomy, slightly musty rooms: there were some above the best bedroom floor, unused and seldom opened.

“The whole place wants light and air,” she told Bertha Gilston, with whom she was on terms of intimacy. “It is really wicked to see that excellent house visibly brooding over its past, and reaching towards rot and mildew in the future. I think we’ll ask my husband if we can’t make a bold plunge and take it upon ourselves to have it all done up. I expect Miss Fingal will cheerfully pay the bills.”

“As meekly as any lamb,” Bertha answered.

They went on to Portland Place and discussed it with Lady Gilston, who had been interested in the heiress since she had heard of the visits to Highbrook Farm, and pleased with her own far-seeingness in bringing them about.

“She seemed such a lonely little soul,” Mrs. Bendish explained; “there was something almost uncanny about her, as if she had been cast up from a dead sea and not known how to cope with life. And that house in Bedford Square has not grown old beautifully—inside, I mean—as the others have; for I know people in three or four of them: the Square has become fashionable of late years, and beautiful women, and people who count, have gone to live there. But John Fingal was a cold man; I heard once that his father was too—and his mother had died early, and somehow humanity slipped away from him and his surroundings. I wanted his niece to alter things in that bleak drawing-room, but she shook her head and just went on sitting in it as if waiting till it was time for the ghosts, who occasionally looked in, to take her on with them.”

A few days later, when Lady Gilston went to Leesbury, she stopped at the White Hart to inquire, and left a basket of grapes she had brought up from Wavercombe. "We must do what we can for her when she comes to Briarpatch," she told Sir James.

There were other callers—Lord Stockton was among them, for he gathered from the newspapers the details of the accident of which Cherry Ripe had told him; and from the Gilstons he heard of Miss Fingal's visits to Highbrook Farm—there was a day when he went there too, a day when a chapter in his life ended. And Bertha Gilston and Jimmy came and stayed two nights at the hotel; and the hour before they left, Bertha stood by her and kissed the hand outstretched on the coverlet. But Miss Fingal knew nothing.

Recovery came slowly and surely. . . . They moved her nearer to the window; but at first she took little account of it. . . .

At last a morning came when she opened her eyes and looked round the room unbelievably, as if she were returning from an unknown country and trying to recognise once familiar things. Gradually some fragments of the past came back, but she could not sort realities from dreams.

"Have I been very ill?" she asked the nurse, "and in bed for a long time?"

"You have been very ill; but you are through the worst—you must rest and not try to talk."

She shut her eyes and slept again—a long blessed sleep that brought her a sense of returning life, though it was difficult to realise all that had happened before the days of blankness; and through her brain visions that were like memories chased each other, but she was afraid to think much—it brought headache and a strange confusion and nervousness.

The spring had come—a glad spring; the common was yellow with gorse and broom, the patches of grass were very green, there was blue in the sky and sunshine on the land, though it was not very warm yet, and the little soft breezes that came stealing in at the windows were capacious. Across the common she could see two or

three trees dimly white with blossom; they were near the wood on the left; she wondered how they had come there, but of course they were in the gardens of houses farther back. She thought of the golf links beyond the unfinished villas on the right. . . .

"I should like to get up and walk about," she told the nurse when she had reached the easy-chair stage.

"You will very soon; you are getting well."

"I wonder if the doctor would let me have the fly out and drive somewhere."

"Yes—soon; it would do you good."

"I want to go to Highbrook Farm—I think it is called Highbrook Farm?"

But the nurse said nothing.

He came a little later, and Miss Fingal, piecing her memories together, thought of Linda; it was surprising that she had not remembered her before.

"I am so much better," she told him; "when may I go and see Mrs. Alliston?"

He hesitated. "I am afraid," he said, "that you cannot go and see her."

"Why not? The trees that arch overhead on the way there are coming out. I never thought so much about the spring as I have done lying here. And I want to see the old women in the cottages on the way to the farm. May I go to-day? It is quite warm enough."

"It is too soon," he answered firmly.

"I remember now," she said with a little laugh, "that I was going to buy a plum-cake the day I was in London—we might telegraph for it if I may go to-morrow? I don't think the children will be shy with me now, for I know better what to say to them."

She made no sign of eagerness to see Linda, though she was conscious of her all the time; but the children were very vivid to her.

"Don't let it trouble you too much," Dr. Wynne told her gently a day or two later; "it is all over—Mrs. Alliston is dead."

She was wonder-struck rather than distressed; but for a moment or two she said nothing, and then—"It's very strange, in some dreamlike way I think I knew.

Perhaps I heard you speak of it when I was ill and had forgotten. Did she want me, or know about the train accident?"

"Yes. I went to her late that afternoon. She tried to send you a message at the last, but she couldn't."

"When did she die?"

"She died one night when you were very ill," the nurse answered.

"Was any one with her?"

"Her mother arrived just in time; the others were too late."

"Too late!" she wondered if Dick Alliston knew, and who had told him. "I wish Bertha Gilston had been in England."

"She and her brother hurried back from Paris. They were here—they stayed a night at this hotel," the nurse answered. "Miss Gilston saw you for a moment."

"Did they go abroad again?"

"No; they are in London, I believe. She asked me to tell you that she would come when you were better, and Mr. Gilston said he would wait till you were at home again."

"Dear old Jimmy!" A strange remark for Miss Fingal, but it seemed to come naturally. "Where are the children?"

"With their grandmother. She took them back with her to Mentone; she is staying at the Winter Palace Hotel."

"Is Janet with them?"

"The nurse? Oh yes, she is evidently very fond of them," the doctor answered.

It was a relief when the doctor and nurse left her alone. Linda's death did not grieve her, the obsession for her had gone: she felt like a calm spectator or the recipient of expected tidings. She imagined the arrival of Lady Hester, the waiting and stillness and soft voices of those about the house, the room in which Linda had died—it must have been the one beyond the sitting-room from which she had entered that first day of all. . . . Had the children been with her? and had she looked out of the open window at the high trees standing together

a little way off—it looked out towards the wood—but no, the nurse said she had died at night, the darkness had stolen in seeking her; had she followed it? And the message she had tried to send? Would she ever be able to bring it, to whisper it in some half-dream, or was it wandering in space? She tried not to think: it confused her and brought back the pains in her head; while all manner of strange ideas forced themselves upon her. . . . She raised herself and looked out at the trees beyond the common, they belonged to the same world as those at the farm; she felt as if some wise subconsciousness was theirs: perhaps they spoke to each other on the winds and whispered messages into the little breezes that wandered by. The world was not made only for human beings; there were many forms of life, and all things had a share; sometimes it was paralysed or very still, or deaf, or blind, or dumb, and only now and then able to make signs; but those who could hear and see must know strange and secret things with which the hurrying crowds had no concern. Her senses were alive, awake to so much more than before she was ill, she told herself; there seemed to be communication even in the air: it was charged—softly, kindly, caressingly charged; and sometimes she felt as if Linda—oh! but such strange thoughts and feelings came into her brain and stirred her heart, they frightened her. . . .

She asked the doctor again a few days later, "When will you let me go home?"

"Have you a motor-car?"

"No."

"Why don't you get one? A train journey is not to be thought of for you yet awhile. My brother always prescribes a car when his patients are recovering—if they can afford it, of course."

"Your brother?"

"My brother is Albergy Wynne, the throat specialist."

"Oh yes, I think I have heard of him." She seemed a little confused.

"A friend—or rather a patient of his—took up a message to your house after your accident; she was at Leesbury, and anxious to be of some use."

"It was very kind of her," Miss Fingal answered with the old formula. "Who was she?"

He hesitated a moment—"Miss Cissie Repton. You have probably heard of her?"

"No—perhaps," she was confused again with the struggle to remember. "I may have forgotten," she explained. "I think Bertha Gilston knows her."

"Perhaps. Well, think about getting a car. It must be a smooth one with good springs and cushions; and no very long journeys yet. It is time that the nurse went, but you ought to have a good maid to look after you," he told her; for he was a practical man, and had discovered that he was dealing with a young woman to whom money was no object.

II.

At last she was able to go for little walks on the common, in and out between the patches of gorse and broom that had become a golden mass during the last sunny week or two, sensible of the soft greenness beneath her feet, and delighted with the tall white growth—cow parsley she heard it was called—that was almost new to her, for she was unused to the wild beauty of the countryside in spring.

One morning when she returned, Mr. Bendish was waiting to see her. "Getting well evidently," he said. "But you will have to be careful for a long time. A head resents any liberties taken with it."

He had always found talk with her difficult, but she interested him as a sort of human puzzle that Time might solve. A young woman who accepted a fortune with as little emotion as she had done, and indulged in no feminine vanities with it, was something of a curiosity. "What do you think of doing next?"

She told him of the doctor's suggestion concerning a car; she had written to Bertha Gilston about a maid.

"Excellent," he exclaimed; "if you will trust me to choose one, I will see to it at once and send it down here.

"Oh, do; but here?"

"Why not? Then you can go away in it; I should think you will be glad to escape the train after your recent experience? Where will you go? To Wavercombe, or to the sea for a bit?"

"To Bedford Square, first."

"I am afraid it is not quite ready for you yet, and you will hardly know it again when it is. You ordered some

improvements before you came here, and since you were too ill to look after the workmen yourself, my wife and Bertha Gilston, who is a very clever young woman, thought they had better take it upon themselves to do it for you. The result is, they have run you up a nice bill with the decorator, but it looks so much better that I hope you will forgive them."

"Forgive them," she exclaimed with infinite relief, "I am so grateful, let them do anything they like, it is too kind and wonderful of them to look after it." They had probably done, she thought, what she would have hesitated to do herself with the tradition of uncle John holding her back, though she was no longer governed by it as she had been only a little while ago. Her illness had seemed to thrust him far back in her memory: the spring was sweeping out the dark corners in her mind, as perhaps the workmen were sweeping them out in the house he had left her.

"They talk of coming to have a look at you one afternoon this week—my wife and Bertha I mean—if you would like a visit from them?"

"I should like it very much—" she wanted to see Bertha; and Mrs. Bendish was kind. "Could some of the dreadful things be sent away now that the house has been made different?" she asked.

"Sent away—what things?"

"First of all, the two tall alabaster vases in the drawing-room."

He was almost angry. "Your uncle valued them, and they are very beautiful."

"Oh yes, I know they are beautiful, but they frighten me. If you like them, do have them, Mr. Bendish. Let me give them to you. Take them away before I come back—and never let me see them again."

"You mean that you don't want them?" He could hardly believe her.

"Yes, I mean that I don't want them. And that black portrait in the study, I should like it to go too; I couldn't live with it again—he looks so wicked—and all those dead law-books with the decayed bindings in the study, and the great yellow map against them."

"You are a very extraordinary young woman." Mr. Bendish knitted his eyebrows together and looked at her keenly. "Is there anything else you want to get rid of?"

She laughed a little and felt as if she were unfastening closed windows to let in light and air. "Yes, the Brussels carpets. I can't bear to think of the foot-prints—the cold dead feet that have gone over them."

"As far as I remember, they are in excellent condition."

"Perhaps, but they are hard and faded, and would never wear out. Stimson came to see me yesterday. I told him his sister might have them all if she could take them away at once. She has a boarding-house at Bayswater."

"And what are you going to put beneath your own feet?"

"Parquet floors, and Persian rugs—and—that sort of thing, when I am strong enough to go and buy them. I have been thinking these last few days, since I felt better, that perhaps I would sell the house and go somewhere else to live."

"I don't think you ought to do that," he answered, "your uncle was very much attached to it. He left you his money—trusted you with it to carry on the tradition of the family."

"But I never knew the family, and I don't know whether the traditions are good or bad and ought to be carried on."

"Well, no"—he was a little puzzled.

"If he had had other relations he might have left his money to them."

"That's true; but hasn't it ever occurred to you that the house is—is—well built and dignified and—that it is different from the houses in South Kensington, for instance?"

"I know—" There came into her mind a picture of the houses in Cheyne Walk, flat-faced, tall and silent-looking, with many windows and sedate front doors, and little square old-world fore-courts. . . . Her eyes rested on the chair where Linda had sat, that day when she

dragged herself in, and the sunlight rested on the gold threads of her hair. "Oh, I will, I will," she cried silently to her own heart, as if she were answering a petition.

"Well?" Mr. Bendish was surprised at her abrupt silence.

She forced herself to go back and take up the thread of their talk. "I was thinking of the houses in Cheyne Walk," she answered, "the old ones, I mean. I used to feel as though they were my friends. They are as old—older perhaps than the cottages on the way to Highbrook Farm, and I want to talk to you about them——"

"That is very singular," he interrupted; the reason I came here to-day—besides wishing to see you—was to give the old women who live in them five pounds—ten shillings each, there are ten of them, as a farewell gift from Mrs. Alliston. It was all she could manage. She told Bertha Gilston once that, if ever she were rich, she meant to have their places done up."

"I am going to do it," Miss Fingal exclaimed, as if she had remembered.

"You! Why should you do it?"

"I want to. I asked the doctor about them the other day—the roofs are bad, the walls need mending, the floors, the fireplaces, everything; I want them put in thorough order. And all the gardens must be done up too, and planted. One woman could have chickens, another a pig or rabbits, or fruit-trees—or lavender bushes, perhaps; each one of them something individual, then she would feel that her life was her own: I have been thinking it all out lately. While I walked on the common this morning I felt as if something was going to happen about it; and you have come."

"But, my dear young lady, why should you do it? You have no interests here." Her proposal and the excitement with which she urged it astounded him.

"I have! Linda Alliston came into my life here: it shall be my gift to her—but I want to do it for those poor things too. I used to see them hobbling to their gates or standing by their doors when I went by. I shall never forget the first day—they were shading their eyes

with their thin hands, looking very old and shaking in the winter sunshine."

"But to do all you say would cost a great deal of money, some hundreds—they want almost rebuilding."

"I don't care if it costs some thousands," she answered, "I want to do it—and to give them easy-chairs and other things, when the cottages are ready, so that they may be comfortable."

"You will have many expenses of your own, remember, the changes in Bedford Square, and the car."

"I will do without them all—if it is too much, but the cottages must be done. You said I had—I forget how much a year—but some thousands, that you and Sir James had invested it and made uncle John's fortune bigger—and I have spent nothing on all that most rich people like—jewels and frocks, and giving parties. I don't care for them, but I want to do this—I must do it. Dr. Wynne lives here and he would see to it. Won't you help and advise him—think of making all those lives happy!"

"You are a very kind and generous woman," he said. "It's a charming idea, and you have a right to do what you please with your money." He shook both her hands at once.

And he thought of her all the way back to London. "You might have knocked me down with a feather," he told his wife. "She suddenly became quite eloquent. I had no idea it was in her. That accident has done her good. She even looks different, much younger, she might be six-and-twenty. She seems bewildered—confused in manner and memories, talks of the houses in Cheyne Walk as being her friends, and about giving the Leesbury old women pigs all in the same breath; but she is more intelligent than she was before—and more human."

"She was human enough before; but she has got at herself, I expect."

"I wish you and Bertha would run down to see her."

"We'll go to-morrow," his wife answered.

Miss Fingal heard the hoot of a car and knew

they had come: she went to the window and waved her hand.

"It's quite true; she does look different—and younger," Mrs. Bendish remarked to Bertha. And they too noticed the confused expression on her face, the struggle she had sometimes even to be coherent.

"My dear," Bertha said when Aline made excuses for herself, "I quite understand; nothing is more difficult to get over than a blow on the head, it interferes with all one's brain arrangements."

"There's something I ought to do, it's waiting for me, crying out to me," she answered, "and I don't know—I can't remember what it is. Linda tried to send me a message—but I never had it."

"You will get it somehow, probably when you least expect it. Don't worry yourself," Bertha said with her comforting smile.

"Perhaps it was about the almshouses, my husband is quite carried away by your generosity," Mrs. Bendish told her. "It is too kind and dear of you."

"Why? She would have done it if she could: it will make them so happy—and it is such an easy deed—it would surely be wicked and unkind not to do it." There were some things that Aline did not understand. She had money: she could give comfort and happiness to a group of poverty-stricken women and without any loss or inconvenience to herself. Where did the virtue come in?

Bertha pulled another cigarette from the jingling collection of oddments at her side and struck a match. "I think you were made to a beautiful pattern," she laughed. "Jimmy said that last night. He would have come with us to-day but we didn't want him; and he hasn't quite got over his last visit here—when you were ill, I mean. He was awfully fond of Linda—though he never allows his fondness for any one to be a worry. And now, my dear, I'll tell you about the maid I have found for you. She is a paragon—" Bertha's finds generally began as paragons and occasionally ended as tragedies.

"I don't know what I shall do with her, I never had

one before," Aline said with a little dismay, when the paragon had been described.

"One gets used to everything, good or ill—time takes it in hand—so be philosophical."

Then Mrs. Bendish explained what they had been doing at the house. "We are hoping you won't make us pay the bills——"

"Indeed, I won't."

"Some of that old furniture is very valuable——"

"Yes, I know, but value alone doesn't matter. Do send away the bits that looked wicked and decayed—not those that have grown old beautifully like one or two in Linda's sitting-room at the farm, or at Briarpatch—not the satinwood piano, if you don't mind, for I feel as if gentle old ladies—who perhaps were lonely too—played on it when they were young. It's the things that seem to have belonged to people who were hard and cold—and are dead. I don't want to feel that they have left any sort of life behind that I must go on living."

"The place looks so different now that it is fresh painted and electric lighted and silk shaded, you won't feel it ghostly any more," Mrs. Bendish said, for she quite understood what the poor little heiress had suffered. "You oughtn't to live there alone, perhaps the future——"

"Oh, don't——" Miss Fingal put her hands before her eyes for a moment. "I can't think yet of the future, I feel as if by that blow in the train, many doors in my brain had been broken open; but I am so confused—waiting for something I cannot get to yet, I don't know what it is; perhaps I am not strong enough to face it." She was silent for a moment, then suddenly she asked, "Have you seen Dick Alliston since——?"

Bertha shook her head. "No, and I have made no sign to him. But I know that one day he'll come walking up to my flat, and I shall forgive him everything he did to her."

"Tell me about Lady Hester."

"She was sweet and sugary and selfish as usual, and everybody was very much relieved when she took herself and the children back to Mentone."

"Will she be kind to them?"

"Oh yes, Janet will see to it if she isn't and write to my father. Lady H. won't risk that, because it would stop the supplies she probably gets from him still. Besides she is always kind while it is easy, and will be to them till she gets bored or finds that they interfere with her plans, then she'll dump them on somebody else."

"She can't stay at Mentone much longer, it will be too warm," Mrs. Bendish said.

"When will she bring them to England?"

Bertha gave a shrug for answer. "By the way," she went on, "she wrote the other day and asked me to collect anything left at the Farm. I didn't want to go there again, so I sent a post-card last night and told the woman I should be here this afternoon."

"Nothing has come; at least I think not—I'll ring and ask."

The waiter brought in a little roll of music.

"It only came half an hour ago," he explained; "they found it behind the piano when the men went to take it away. There is nothing else."

It was the Chopin polonaise that had been on the stand when Miss Fingal paid her first visit.

"I wish I might have it," she said.

"Pinch it!" Bertha pulled out another cigarette.

"Pinch it?"

"Slang, you innocent, for stealing—no one wants it. I shall say I gave it you."

III.

MISS FINGAL went back to London in her own car, with her own maid to look after her. The car was smooth-going, brown-leather lined, with extra silk cushions. The chauffeur was a good and careful man called Pryce. The maid, her name was Burdett, called her employer Madame in a way that was pleasantly suggestive of foreign countries, and she had the great merit of keeping out of the way when she was not required to be in it.

The farewell to Leesbury was a pathetic triumph. Every one within a few miles of The White Hart knew about the accident, and was interested in the slight figure, with the grave face and soft eyes, that wandered slowly on the common, or rested on the garden chair screened by the gorse bushes that made a golden setting to her. Dr. Wynne too, who had been active in seeing local authorities and urging matters to a swift conclusion, told all his patients about the almshouses, and then Miss Fingal became a heroine, though of this she had no idea.

The old women themselves were overjoyed; and after much talk in and out of doorways, two of them, as representative of them all, paid her a visit the day before her departure, carrying with much importance a nosegay to which all their gardens had contributed. She was a little taken aback at their arrival, but when she saw two aged and tottering women, grateful and deferential, full of the responsibility of their mission, her expression melted into smiles, and her heart went out to them.

"Oh, but it is too kind of you to come," she said, "and to bring me such a charming bouquet. I will take it

back with me to-morrow. How sweet they are—I love these stocks and lilacs so.” She put them against her face for a moment, as Linda would have done.

“We’d like all of us to have come, miss, but we knew it would have been too many for you, so just us two have—to thank you and say God bless you—and we’ll pray for you every day as long as we live. We never heard of such goodness”—the speaker nearly broke down—“it’s been dreadful the way the wet came in, and now——”

Miss Fingal was almost distressed at their gratitude. “It will give me such comfort to think of you,” she said, and took a wrinkled hand in hers, “warm and comfy in your mended houses, but I don’t want you to thank me or to remember that I did it; try to think that it is Mrs. Alliston’s doing, she knew you in her happiest days, and cared for you—they both did. I feel as if she had asked me to do for her what she would have done herself if it had been possible.”

“Yes, miss, we know she would if she could,” the older of the two women said—she had a long projecting yellow tooth; it looked like a little tusk that had lost its way—“she and Mr. Alliston too, they always seemed as if they wanted to see others happy: they used to come laughing along the lane—and he’d have his arm round her shoulder sometimes, just as if they were sweet-hearts.”

“They were,” the other old woman nodded wisely.

“They were,” Miss Fingal echoed, and her heart beat quicker.

“They come in to see us several times, and Mrs. Willett—at the last house—made them a cup of tea once—and they’d talk to us a lot about the gardens. No one ever would have thought he’d have left her. I believe it broke her heart—don’t you think it did, Miss? Children are a great deal but they’re not everything.” But to this Aline was silent. The visitor adroitly changed the subject.

“She was very fond of you, miss. She must have been dreadfully upset about the accident. Do you know how it happened?”

"I don't think I do," Miss Fingal answered, wondering how to send them away without hurting their feelings. "You see I became insensible and knew nothing after the first shock."

"And you didn't hear about Mrs. Alliston—nor anything, miss?"

"No, about nothing for a long time."

"We was sorry for you, all of us. We saw you go by in the carriage the first time you went to see her and afterwards too," the old woman in the black satin bonnet said, while the one with the tusk waited impatiently to ask—

"Is it true you are going to London in your motor-car—all the way, miss?"

"Yes, all the way." Then, with a happy impulse, "Would you like to go home in it?"

It took away their breath. "Go home in it, why I never was in one in my life—it would be a treat."

"Then you must go in one now. But first there is tea for you downstairs. Miss Burdett will have some with you, if you don't mind—for I must rest a little; but I will take you back myself." Miss Fingal felt that they would resent too familiar a manner towards a lady of their own class, hence the respectful mention of the maid.

And so, after a large and bounteous meal in the hotel parlour, they went home, sitting together on the front seat. Miss Fingal explained that she liked the back one better; and this was true, for she dreaded going along the narrow road with her face towards Highbrook Farm.

"We'll never forget you, miss," they said. "We can hardly believe we are awake—we never expected anything as good in this world."

The car drew up with a pleasant whiz and hoot before the cottages, and eight more old women came out from the open doors and gathered round and curtsied, and, with happiness written on their faces, excitedly mumbled their thanks, and took the thin white hands outstretched to them.

"God will bless you," they said, "He will—He will," as if it were a chorus.

Then suddenly Aline burst into tears. "Oh, you mustn't—you mustn't say anything more—please, please don't thank me," she said; "I love to do it—it makes me so grateful to all of you—I shall never forget this evening and your kindness, and the flowers—and I will think of you very often. But I am too happy to bear it any longer—Pryce, you must turn the car and go back to The White Hart." And so waving to them and smiling through her tears she departed. The women watched her out of sight and blessed her and went into their cottages full of content, knowing that when the cold weather came again, no driving winds or dripping rains would find them out, and their fires would burn brightly, warming them through and through; for Dr. Wynne had told them that a fund for winter coal had been created by their benefactress.

"Dear old women," she said to herself as she went back to the hotel, "I have done more for myself than for them. I didn't know what joy could be bought with money. Oh, uncle John, I am very grateful now! And Linda, are you glad? I don't grieve for you, but that is only because I have been stunned, and it is difficult to know at first what one feels and thinks—but I want to do all the things that you wanted done." And it seemed as if Linda whispered, "Yes, dear, I know—I know——"

All the way to London she felt like a woman who had not yet recovered from a dream—a dream-like excitement wrapt her round like a holiday garment worn in church. She knew that her whole life and outlook had changed: something was vanishing, breaking down—the intangible fence, that had always seemed to be between her and the world in which people lived. She was still on the threshold, but she had entered its precincts, equipped with new capacities and emotions not yet to be understood, but that the future would make plain. . . . And she was going back to the house in Bedford Square—from which the hauntings had vanished into oblivion. . . . And soon she would go to Wavercombe. Her heart throbbed with an excitement that caught her by the throat: she had not known of her own longing, but it was there and uplifted her.

The people in the hotel had stood in a group to watch her out of sight. She looked back and strained her eyes to see the last of them, shuddering a little as she passed the corner that led to the station. Burdett, against her highly respectful inclination, sat beside her; and on the back seat carefully shielded from dust and the too ardent rays of the afternoon sun was the nosegay from the almshouses. She wondered how the garden at the farm looked, and if the honeysuckle at the end was in bloom yet, and then suddenly there came to her a vision of Linda's children—on the seat facing her—going back with her to London, Janet nursing little Bridget, and Sturdie turning his face from side to side as they went along. She had often been conscious of them lately, as if they had quietly stolen up to her; in a measure the old awkwardness she had felt with children prevented her from welcoming them even in her thoughts . . . but the awkwardness was different and eager.

The house in Bedford Square looked spick and span in its fresh paint. The dreadful yellow blinds had gone, there were half-blinds of silk and muslin, and flower-boxes full of flowers and tender greenery: the street door had become a deep blue and the iron knocker was replaced by a beaten brass one. Stimson and Mrs. Turner and the maids were ready to welcome her just as when she arrived, first of all. "We *are* glad to see you back, miss," they said. She felt it to be a home-coming to uncle John's house: the strangeness that it should be home made her smile.

The hall and stairs delighted her; there were soft carpets and rugs and electric lamps, and, though the changes were not finished, it was easy to see that soon the house would look happy and cared-for, mindful of its past and ready for its future. There had been a great find in the drawing-room, for, when the drab carpet was taken up, a parquet floor was disclosed. It had been cleaned and polished, and one portion of the room arranged ready for its owner. "Mrs. Bendish and Miss Gilston wanted just to make it a bit comfortable for you, miss," Mrs. Turner explained, "but they thought you would like to see to the rest yourself.

They'll be here presently. They've taken a deal of trouble, and Stimson and I have done what we could," she added humbly.

"Yes, dear Mrs. Turner, you've all been splendid." She looked round at the walls—they were panelled and painted white, at the farther end the alabaster vases no longer stood like ghostly sentinels. "We were sorry to see them go," Mrs. Turner said with a little regret which she could not keep out of her voice, "for Mr. Fingal thought a great deal of them; but if you didn't care for them, miss, it is better that Mr. Bendish should have them; he was so pleased—you should have seen the care he took in getting them away. But Miss Gilston said they made the drawing-room look like a cemetery, and of course we don't want any monuments here, do we, miss?"

"No, we don't. I am going to love this room."

"I never saw any one so changed in my life," Mrs. Turner told Stimson. "She seems ever so much younger, all those lines on her face are gone, and there's a sort of light in her eyes that somehow makes you wonder—just as if she had some sort of comfort inside her."

Perhaps the most welcome change was in the room where uncle John had died. The bedstead was still there—it was a beautiful bit of furniture, Mrs. Bendish explained later, and a privilege to be born or to die between its carved posts—but now it had a gay embroidered valance above and below, and a beautiful quilt, and a large square frilled pillow that made it look different altogether from Miss Fingal's recollection of it. She sat down on the little cushioned couch at the foot. "I can never be grateful enough for all this," she thought, "it is like remembering a tomb and finding a peaceful heaven. And the other rooms?" she asked Mrs. Turner.

They were painted and papered and freshened and—waiting. She tried to remember the purpose for which they would be wanted, but she could not reach the side of her consciousness that knew.

She went back to the drawing-room and sat very

still in the happy-looking corner, while into her mind there came ideas for ways in which to finish the changes—things she could buy or seek in shops of the sort that had never interested her in the old days. She smiled at the loose covers and silk cushions which Mrs. Bendish had carefully taken the opportunity to get when the chance came,—“they make so much difference,” she thought. The satinwood piano remained, it looked quaint and somehow happier; she longed to hear the sound of it again.

As if she had been bidden, Burdett came in with the Chopin polonaise. “I thought you would like to have it here, madame,” she said.

“Open the piano and put it on the music-stand.” As if hardly conscious of what she was doing Miss Fingal went towards it.

“It’s too difficult for me,” she said to herself; but her eyes recognised the notes; she heard them in her brain and found them naturally. They brought her messages—she bent forward—listening—waiting—entreating in her heart, stumbling like one half awakened, till suddenly, lifting her hands and reaching out to the top of the music-stand, she rested her face down on her arms and gave herself up to the dreams that beset her.

“I wonder if my head will ever be right—or what has come to me——”

There was the rustle of a dress—“I wouldn’t let them announce me, I just walked up.” Bertha Gilston was there, calm and cheerful as usual—and untidy of course. “Mrs. Bendish and I were coming to ask what you think of our efforts, but she was prevented at the last minute,” she explained.

“It’s rather nice to get you alone,” Aline said and kissed her: it seemed natural. “She has been wonderfully good, you both have; I don’t believe you know how much you have done for me.” This was when they had gone to the corner and the inevitable tea-table was between them. “You have changed the whole house and helped to change my whole life—though I am half afraid of people still——”

“That’s only because you’ve lived too much alone,”

Bertha said, fumbling for her everlasting cigarette "This is going to be quite a nice place now, let people see you in it, and give them food—food is so humanising. And lunch out, dine out, do anything you've not done before. You want experience."

"I know—but it takes courage; I have more than I had," with a little smile that Bertha found fascinating, "but I don't know how to begin."

"My dear, you won't find much difficulty, you bet. People in London love money, adore it, and do all they know to make other people spend it. My stepmother, by the way, means to ask you to luncheon. Lord Stockton wants to meet you, he heard of your kindness to Linda. He hasn't married his Girton girl yet—I think they are bored with each other; but she fits in with his theory of marriage.

"How does she fit in?"

"Well, she's clever and agreeable. There are a few subjects she can talk about as if she understood them and she likes country life. He says he wants to settle down in the country—though I think he only imagines it: people's tastes and theories are often at variance. He has a big place in Sussex, a grey-haired mother and a sister, who go to church twice on Sunday and take an interest in poor people; and the life his people have always led is the sort he thinks he ought to encourage for the sake of the country and its traditions. What he really enjoys is being in London, seeing life with an air of disapproval and pretending that he wants to do good works." She knocked the ashes from her cigarette into her saucer. "Frivolling without laughter—that describes his present occupation. He goes to night-clubs and pretends to be shocked in order to be certain that he is highly virtuous." She stopped for a moment. "Poor Cyril Batson——" she laughed.

"What has he to do with it—and why poor?" Aline asked.

"Because he is in love with Cissie Repton. He took her out one night, and gave her supper at vast expense, and then she let Edward Stockton see her home and snubbed Cyril. But that was some time ago. By

the way, Jimmy is coming to see you to-day or to-morrow."

"I should like to see him."

"And I want you to come to tea at my studio. Dissipations are piling up before you, my dear."

"If only my head holds out," Aline held it between her hands, leaning forward.

"It's a pretty head," Bertha said almost affectionately, "and now you do your hair like that," she touched it softly, "you make me think of Linda, though your face is quite different. I was telling Dick Alliston about you last night."

"Dick Alliston! Then you have seen him?" she said quickly.

"Yes. He knows that you went to see Linda. I wish you knew him."

She shook her pretty head. "I couldn't forgive him for all he did to her."

"I don't," Bertha answered calmly, "but I don't want to leave him to his own damnation and the wiles of Cherry Ripe."

"I can't think why he left Linda—when she loved him so much."

"Loved him too much, as I told you at Leesbury. It never does. Be very wily with your lovers, my dear," she added with a twinkle in her eye, "and keep them at a respectful arm's length."

"I will," Aline answered with a weary little smile, "but I can't imagine any one ever loving me." She thought of the man and woman standing by the pond at Wavercombe, and a moment's longing and aching took hold of her. . . . Then she asked, "Did Mr. Alliston say anything about his children?"

"Not a word."

"It's so curious—but they are always, always—at the back of my thoughts. I hear their voices sometimes, and to-day I imagined them in the motor-car, sitting opposite to me—yet I only saw them twice, and they didn't like me much—they were shy—it was Linda I went to see."

"I wish you had them here," in a leisurely voice.

"I should be afraid of not doing the right thing. And perhaps they would not care for me. . . . I never knew any children."

"You may marry, of course, and have some of your own," Bertha said absently: then rather abruptly, "When will you come and see my flat? It must be soon, for presently I am going to visit my humble relations in Gloucestershire. My uncle is a market-gardener, which is one reason why my stepmother looks down on us—I believe she thinks he is a greengrocer. She isn't snobby, you know; but she belonged to one set all her life, till she met my father, and we belong to another. She believes in an upper and a lower class—so do I. We've got on a little, because my father made money and could afford to educate us and do things he had never done before. When the foundations are strong enough and we are sufficiently licked into shape we may really belong to her class—now we are only mushrooms." Bertha knocked the ashes from her cigarette. "She has done her duty by us," she went on, "and as duty is seldom pleasant I respect her: there's no particular occasion to do more." She smoked peacefully for a moment. "When are you going to the cottage?"

"I don't know, but soon; it seems to be calling me, Bertha dear"—she looked up with a half-frightened expression in her eyes. "I don't think I knew how to live anywhere till lately."

"You're a strange creature, my Aline." Bertha gave her a large benevolent smile. "I wonder if you were changed at birth and have only just realised the fact. Perhaps some day I shall see you begin a lurid course of dissipation."

"I don't think you will," with a gay little laugh that made Bertha look up: it was like an echo.

"It would probably bore you—it's overrated like most things. My dear, you have learnt to laugh—it is always a good asset, and you have grown prettier since that day when Jimmy and I had tea with you. And, you look so much happier than you did—which is rather strange all things considered,—what has come to you?"

"The summer—it is early summer already," Aline answered; "it seems to have gathered me in; only the winter did before: I thought that when I was at Wavercombe and the cold rain fell nearly all the time, and the wind seemed to be seeking for something and never finding it among the trees."

"Well—I give it up. But look here, I will help you and so will Mrs. Bendish, if you want her, to get through this house business, and then hurry off to Wavercombe; it's lovely at this time of year, and my parents are not there yet to worry you."

"Oh yes, I want to go—I have written to Webb already. I shall motor." She considered for a moment. "Bertha," she said with a little burst, "I think I will go there to-morrow——"

"You mustn't!—it would be madness after your journey to-day."

"I want to see it again—so much."

"But you are not strong enough yet. It is a great strain, going a long distance two days running after an illness. Besides, Mrs. Bendish and I have worked so hard at this house. You must stay in London now, you erratic person, and help us finish it up. I shall be away the week after next—wait till then."

"If I went for just a day?" she pleaded.

"It is too far."

"For one night then? I must see it again, Bertha; think of all that time I was at The White Hart, all through the spring, and I not there——"

"But in the winter you did not care a bit for going to the cottage. Father was so surprised."

"All that seems like years ago and belonging to another order of things."

"Again, I give it up," Bertha said—"you are obstinate, as Linda was, so go and get it over, my dear; but let us finish off here quickly, after to-morrow, ready for all your balls and dinner-parties"—she got up. "It's time I returned to my humble flat."

She changed her mind outside and went to the Embankment and up to Jimmy's rooms. He was reading by the open window. The trees beneath were thickly

green—the river looked sleepy, the slow-moving craft seemed to caress it.

“What the devil brought you here?” he asked lazily.

“A mere desire to see you, and to sit for ten minutes by your open window.”

He pulled a chair towards it. “Where have you been?”

“To Aline Fingal. Jimmy, I wonder why we have taken her up and feel so attracted to her?”

“I don’t know,” he got down a pipe. “Some queer reason tucked away in the scheme of things.”

IV.

THROUGH the long twilight she sat counting the hours till the morrow, content yet impatient, glad of her sudden resolution. Now that she had let the inclination loose, she knew that she had been longing to see the cottage again, that she was waiting for the moment when she would start on her way to it. She imagined so much that had happened there; Dick Alliston and Linda, when they were first married, planning the alterations to the garden—Linda arranging flowers—tea-time under the acacia-tree on the little lawn, or lazy novel-reading in the sunshine—and *tête-à-tête* dinners in the dining-room, when Linda wore her prettiest garments to charm the lover who was her husband. . . . She lost herself in a dream of that bygone happiness of another woman. There were the jaunts to Normandy and Brittany—the going to London and Dick's invention, his carelessness as to who had the credit for it so long as the thing was done; the coming of Sturdie . . . then the gradual change—his absences and forgetting. . . .

Stimson came in and switched on a lamp and two or three of the electric candles; they filled the room with softly shaded light. The ghostly crowd that once had stolen in among the grey shadows, but that no light reached or disclosed, though she had felt them to be there, had gone, as the lonely silent self of long years had gone: for in her heart there was companionship. And to the room—the new room as she called it to herself—there came—through all the waking hours of day and twilight hours of evening—the children; she smiled at them and held out her arms to them, and realised that

she loved them—she who had never cared for children felt herself longing, waiting for Sturdie and Bridget.

She thought of what Bertha had said, and then of the empty rooms above, of the closed rooms at the cottage, and hazily of the meaning they might hold for her; but it was only the suggestion of her tired fancy, the reaching out into the impossible that comes to all day-dreamers . . . and she thought, but with a fear that made her tremble and draw back, of Dick Alliston. Lately he, too, had come into her vision, not clearly as the children did, but to the background; he brought pain and dismay, she turned away from him, yet she knew him to be there. She hurried her thoughts in other directions—but he followed them. . . . It was the children she wanted—to see them, hear them, feel that they were not afraid of her. . . . What was Lady Hester going to do with them? . . . “I’ll come to you, dears,” she cried. “I’ll come. I should love to see you with the Italian sky over you, and its sea beside you,—Sturdie’s little feet running on the sand, and Bridget turning her eyes westward—towards the land in which her mother was. . . . O dear God, what was the message she sent me, shall I never know?” She strained her eyes to see, her ears to hear, her heart with longing, but there only came to her the sense of an open window, a dim room . . . darkness without and a forlorn fugitive on a lonely road. . . . It was no good, she must think of to-morrow—of to-morrow and the cottage. . . .

She surprised her household by the early hour of her rising and her impatience to start. It was lovely to feel the fresh spring air upon her face. Pryce knew all the details of the road and the inn half-way at which they were to lunch. . . . The motor was open, of course, and as they went smoothly along, it seemed like the dream of a journey that she had made in a waking time long ago. She did not know the names of the places she passed; but vaguely she recognised them and felt that they knew whither she was going, and what there was to do at the other end. There were fir woods, dark and high, on either side of the yellow roads as the car whizzed into Surrey, or wide stretches of open land with

bell-heather and clumps of fresh green whortleberry, small leaves and sturdy, very low on the ground; but the little purple fruit was not yet ripe. Wild parsley and taller foxglove by the wayside, and, as she went on to Hampshire, masses of double lady's-smock and stitchwort, blue-eyed speedwell and all the wealth of wild flowers she had seen at Leesbury. She felt as if they too knew better than she some secret of her future, and watched her going towards it. She looked back at the Surrey hills. In the winter they had been shrouded in mist and rain, but now that the light caressed their darkness and blueness, or the sunshine fell on the ground before them, as if loath to disturb the summer haze that clung to them, they made a mysterious background, a heavenly barrier to the landscape, and something akin to worship filled her heart. . . .

The cottage looked altogether different: her heart bounded when she saw it resting joyously in its setting; the trees had burst into leaf and bloom, the horse-chestnuts and laburnums. Honeysuckle and clematis rioted, and a rose-tree climbed over the porch. As the car drew near, she caught a glimpse of the orchard far back at the side. The blossom was not quite over though it was not what it had been, Webb told her, when he took her along the flagged pathway—every stone was full of meaning and had a memory for her. She stood in the grass that grew high in the orchard, green covering her feet, white blossom crowning the greenness above her head, and the sunshine everywhere—it's gold came flecking through the branches. "This is my real home," she felt; "in Bedford Square there will be peace, and I am going to live there a great deal, but this is my home." Webb showed her all the plantings and improvements, the labels on the flower-beds, the fast-growing hedge inside the rabbit fence that had replaced the barbed wire, and the kitchen-garden, and explained the prospects and mysteries of early crops.

Inside the cottage, Mrs. Webb and Emma were ready and anxious to wait on her, a little resentful of the fact that she had brought a lady's-maid, sympathetic about her accident, and silent concerning the tragedy at High-

brook Farm, as a subject not for them to broach. They had decked the hall with green boughs placed in the pots that had waited for them through the winter, and flowers were in the drawing-room. And in all the rooms there was the memory of happiness—subdued and saddened—lingering for her to carry on: the means were hidden as yet, as the mists had hidden the Surrey hills in the winter, but they would be made plain when the mists in her brain had gone and the light came.

She went up to her room—the scent of the outside roses filled it. The writing-table and the little book-case with the volumes of poetry in it seemed like friends. She looked at the bed on which Linda had shed hopeless tears in the first days of her misery. “I have come back,” she said, “I have come to your home, dearest, to guard it and care for it.” She sat down by the open window and reaching to a crimson rose held it against her face.

Presently Mrs. Webb appeared, “anxious to see her without the maid.” “Poor young lady,” she said when at last they spoke of Linda, “we were grieved to hear that she had gone, and glad that you were near her—almost to the end, weren’t you, miss? I am sure she liked knowing that you had got this place, for she did love it, and you see Mr. Fingal—well, it never seemed to belong to him somehow. I was saying that to Emma only yesterday when your telegram came. We set to and got the rooms ready at once. I hope you think it all looks nice, miss?”

“Oh, yes, very. And now it must all be kept ready—as if she were coming back, just as it is now. It is lovely, and the other rooms must be opened too. They may be wanted quite suddenly.” The words said themselves, and she smiled a happy dreamy smile that set Mrs. Webb wondering.

“Yes, miss,” she said, “there are only the dust sheets to take off—we have given the little square room to your maid, we thought you would like her near you; so there are only the two at the end of the passage not used: we made the dressing-room ready in case you liked keeping the door open and going to look out at

the garden. We wish you were going to stay longer, for this place is lovely in summer; Mr. Randall said so only the other day. He's called every month to know when you were likely to be back, and was very sorry to hear of your accident. When do you think you will be here again, miss? It's such a long way to come just for one night."

"I don't know—but soon, very soon." Her eyes had perplexity in them, and the conflict in her mind, as of emotion and knowledge, left only bewilderment and blankness.

She went back to London in the morning rested and content, loaded with green boughs and flowers. She laughed a little as she looked at them knowing how incongruous they would have looked only a year ago in uncle John's gloomy house, but it was such a different house now, and it would be a delightful excitement to arrange them. "If we could only find enough glasses and vases for them!" she said to Mrs. Turner. "We must buy some, for Webb is going to send up a hamper every week."

"You see, miss, Mr. Fingal never had a flower in the house," the worthy woman explained, feeling apologetic for her late master, "four silver candlesticks on the table if he had a visitor, two when he was alone. As for flowers, he disapproved of them. Once when my sister sent me some sweet-peas and I put a few on the table in his study, he seemed quite put out. He said flowers had a way of dropping and made the place untidy."

"The house is going to be untidy very often," Miss Fingal told her, "it's going to be made happy and alive."

"Well, it's wanted to be that, miss, it used to be so quiet, on winter nights especially, you might have heard the dead turn in their graves, and I said to Stimson once that a child's voice has never been heard in it all the time I have lived here."

"Never a child's voice had been heard in it. . . ." She thought over the words. . . .

The next few days were hurrying days—there were workmen to clear out, furniture to move or to send

away or to receive, and the disused rooms to make ready. "I want them all to be open, ready and fit to live in," she said—"I could not bear a silent house and closed windows and shut doors again."

Mrs. Bendish and Bertha came and lunched and went out with her afterwards to choose some of the things that were still wanted, but she was no longer hazy about them as she had been, she knew and recognised them: and luckily expense was no object. All the Brussels carpets had vanished, soft felt and Axminster and valuable rugs had taken their place. The worn law-books in the library, the old faded volumes she had never had courage to open and the yellow parchment map had gone too; the book-shelves remained, but they held the works chiefly of mid-Victorian writers, Thackeray and Dickens, the historians and poets. The ponderous writing-table and bronze inkstand were not molested, she had felt that it would be unkind to banish them, bound up as they were with memories of that strange morning when she had set forth from Battersea to hear of her fortune.

Sir James dropped in a few days later and was delighted to find this evidence of her gratitude. "That table is an excellent bit of furniture," he said, "and I'm relieved to see that you have not turned it out of doors. You young ladies have queer ideas nowadays; upon my word, the way the world marches on is extraordinary: I don't wonder John Brown's body preferred staying behind to moulder in the ground." He appeared to consider this a highly humorous remark. "And now tell me what induced you to set about doing up those cottages at Leesbury?"

"I wanted to do it," she answered, "you can't think what dear old things they are who live in them."

"I dare say—I dare say," he repeated—"I always prefer dear young things myself,—but you are doing it so lavishly, you might have tinkered them up a bit for a hundred or two to last out the present set of occupants, and left some one else to look after the next lot."

"I want them done properly—as best they can be done," she answered gently, but with a determined

note in her voice that made him tell himself she had taken the bit between her teeth. "You must be very good, Sir James, and not interfere at all in that business."

"Bendish tells me that the gardens are to be put in order too, pig-sties erected, chicken-runs made, rabbit-hutches and beehives bought, and the Lord only knows what besides."

"And the Lord and the parish, and Dr. Wynne and the lawyers only know what besides—at present," she laughed.

He looked at her in astonishment. "Why, you've become quite jocular. I expect you enjoy having your own way. It's very good of you, I'm sure, to do up the cottages or almshouses, or whatever they are. You must stipulate that they put a plate on the centre one, stating what you have done for them."

"Oh, I wouldn't for the world," she answered quickly; "if it has any tablet at all it wouldn't have my name but 'In memory of Linda Alliston.' It is through her, for she wanted to do it."

"That's a very different story—we all of us want to do things and don't. Never hide your light under a bushel. Do you mean to say that you won't allow any tribute to your generosity to appear?"

"It isn't generosity. I've given myself a great satisfaction, a great happiness, and it has to be paid for."

"It will cost you £1000 or more—what with the gardens and the rest of it; there are ten houses, all of them only fit to pull down."

"I don't care what it costs. What is the use of money unless one spends it?"

"Why, that is what Jimmy says—he said the other day that it didn't matter whether it was gold or a lump of coal till you wanted to spend or burn it."

"He is quite right."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it, but I don't agree with you. Money is the great power in these days and should be spent so as to get the utmost value out of it."

"That is what I am doing, dear Sir James. And

you need not upbraid me," she said with a smile. "Think how much *you* have spent on kindness."

"I? Not a bit of it. I've given some to hospitals and institutions of course."

"I don't mean that at all. Linda told me how kind you were, and how generous." His face softened in a moment.

"Did she? But I was very fond of her, poor thing. She ought to have known better than to have married Alliston, though one couldn't help liking the dog, I must say that for him. I'm glad she told you I was kind to her; but you are beginning to throw about your money, young lady. Take care you don't end up as a spend-thrift: Bendish and I thought it was going to be hoarded at one time. I won't interfere about the cottages if Linda wanted them done—she was a charming creature. You never met her mother, Lady Hester. She is clever and a thorough woman of the world—been in the best society all her life of course—she's a woman of very good family"—at which Miss Fingal smiled.

"I don't know her."

"You will, you may depend upon that; she makes a point of knowing rich people. I'm always afraid of her turning up and planting the children at Beechwood. It is the sort of thing she would do and never turn a hair: nice children, no doubt, but I have had enough of my own. By the way, I hear you are coming to lunch with us to-morrow. Lady Gilston has invited Lord Stockton; he is a cousin of ours—hers that is." He stroked his nose while he said it. "Has a bee in his bonnet, but he is all right and a charming fellow."

He took his departure feeling that he had been tactful and agreeable, and pleased at seeing how much happier and interested in things generally he had found his ward, as he liked to call her to others, than she had been six months ago.

V.

SHE wandered over the house in the afternoon—after Sir James's visit—giving herself the infinite relief of realising all the changes that had been made, and not taking into account that the summer sun was responsible for much of the cheerfulness that reigned.

"I am beginning to love this place too," she told herself. The white panelled rooms, and the branches of leaves and blossom gave her a sense of happiness that would have been a little absurd if it had not been pathetic—it seemed almost impossible that she could have lived for eight years silent and alone in the Battersea flat.

The drawing-room pleased her more than any other part of the house, it was so light and comfortable, the trees in the square were so green; they looked in from across the way with a stately air of age and subdued knowledge that made her feel towards them as she had towards the houses in Cheyne Walk. The piano was open, it was always open, she had discovered that she was hungry for the sound of music. She remembered how she used to read the prospectus of the opera in the spring and think that some day—some day, when she had courage—she would go to the gallery on a Wagner night. "I will now," she thought, it was a sudden inspiration, "and invite Bertha and Jimmy—before she goes away, but we will have a box, a large one so that we can lean back in corners to listen. There are strange roads through music, I could go along them to the world's end in the dream-way I have learnt lately." She stopped, as if even at the thought of them she had travelled far, and looked round uneasily, and listened

and smiled as if she had recognised some one she had loved. . . . "I wonder," she said to herself, "how long it would take to get to Mentone and if they are still there. If they have gone on to some other place we might follow and——"

Then the door opened and Stimson appeared with an injured expression on his face.

"Miss Cissie Repton, miss, wants to know if you will see her."

"Who?"

"Miss Cissie Repton," he repeated. "I told her I thought not," he added sternly.

There was a low ripple of laughter; a merry voice said, "But you will, won't you?" And Cherry Ripe, flushed and amused, walked in. She wore a white frock, a little cluster of roses was in her bosom, on her head a coquettish toque with a wreath of roses round it that set off the burnished gold of the hair beneath it. "You will, won't you? Your butler is frightfully grumpy. I just followed him up."

Miss Fingal rose to her feet and looked at her visitor with speechless astonishment, and then, retreating, she stood with her back to the open piano.

Cherry Ripe remembered it was so that Linda had stood when she entered unceremoniously upon her, just as she had done upon Miss Fingal to-day. "You don't know me," she said, "but I was at Leesbury the day of the train smash and awfully sorry about your accident. I've come to ask after you. Last time I saw you, you were being carried along on a stretcher."

"Oh yes, they told me. You kindly brought up a message to them here," Miss Fingal answered. "Thank you for calling to inquire," she added with the curious aloofness that often distinguished her.

"Don't mention it, glad to see you about." Cherry Ripe sent a wandering glance round the room and sat down. "Do you feel all right again? Awful bore for you, wasn't it? Lucky you're not disfigured."

"Yes." Miss Fingal's manner showed that her visitor, having made her polite inquiry, was not expected to stay any longer, or to sit down.

"How did you get on, you were ill for a long time, weren't you?"

"Yes, for a long time."

"Linda Alliston died a few days after, didn't she? I didn't hear for certain when it was."

"Did you know Mrs. Alliston?"

"Yes, of course. I had been to see her the day of your smash."

"I wonder you dared——"

"Easily done, it was an adventure—I love adventure, don't you? Shouldn't think you did though," in an amused tone. "I live on it. Poor Linda, I was awfully sorry for her."

Miss Fingal raised her head. "Did you usually call her by her Christian name?"

"Always—behind her back. I only saw her once—no, twice. Of course you know who I am, so it's no good beating about the bush. I saw her in the divorce court first, I told her so——"

"You told her?" Her listener was petrified.

"I did. But you might have knocked me down with a feather when I saw how unhappy and ill she was—and I just cursed myself for what I had done." The expression in her eyes made her beautiful for a moment.

Miss Fingal saw it and in a sense was fascinated. "It was dreadful—what you did," she said coldly.

"But why are *you* starched about it—were you so fond of her?"

"I loved her better than any one else in the world. She was very ill—dying—you might at least have left her alone."

"It was beastly of me, but I had to see her. . . . I used to think about her so much, she was always in my thoughts, she and Dick—I was possessed by them." She reflected for a moment, then went on quickly. "Look here, if you were so fond of her, I should like you to understand how it was——"

"I would rather not."

Cherry Ripe took no notice. "I was mad about Dick—mad—though I only went off with him for a lark and because I always wanted a man I couldn't get. I

never cared for one who was easy. He got sick of me after a bit, but I hung on like grim death—and it's always a mistake to hang on to a man, isn't it?"

"I don't know," Miss Fingal answered, shrinking from her.

Cherry Ripe saw it. "No, I shouldn't think you did," she said with compassionate contempt. "Well, it is. But there was no one like Dick Alliston—if you didn't want to feel deadly."

"Did you never care for any one else?"

"There were lots before him but I never cared for them, except for the first one. One generally goes to the devil for one man, and learns how to pay off the rest. There was something about Dicky that made me want him. What did you feel about him?"

"I never saw him."

"Wait till you do, I should like to know——"

"We won't discuss it." Miss Fingal looked at the door and made a step towards it.

"I am not going for a minute or two, so you may as well sit down," Cherry Ripe said with a smile on the lips that had been reddened—just a little—by art. "It's no good getting on stilts with me, I haven't meant to be a beast—though I am one, I know."

"Do you love him still?"

"Not as much as I did. You see there have been others since. I made myself have them to get over it, but I was frantic about him when I went to Linda, mad to get him back—just mad."

"*She* couldn't help you to do that—I cannot understand why you went to her."

"I heard about her from Albery Wynne, he is the brother of the doctor at Leesbury. He looks after my throat for me. He told me it was all up with her, that she was going to die, and I felt as if I would give anything in the world to get hold of Dick's children."

"Dick's children?" Aline's lips went white, something like fury seized her.

Cherry Ripe stared at her in amazement. "What has it got to do with you?"

"Nothing." She could hardly speak.

"Well, why shouldn't I?" There was a pause; then she went on, "I thought Dick would want them, but I knew he hadn't money enough to bring them up as he would like. I can makes lots and I've lots put by, I've made a heap out of rubber. I was awfully worried when I heard about Linda—in case she had fretted; I thought it would make up for what I had done if I took the children and gave them everything I had, settled it on them—brought them up properly——"

"You!"

"I told her all I would do for them if she would say that I was to have them, that I'd take care they didn't go off the rails—I've gone off them scores of times, but I wouldn't have let them. If she had given them to me, it would have seemed like getting religion—been my salvation; and his too, perhaps, for I believe I could have married him then—I would if he had wanted me—and the children would have kept us together."

"I think it must have been your visit that killed her."

Cherry Ripe burst into tears, they trickled down her flushed cheeks like a sudden shower. "Oh, don't say that, I hate now to think I went—it's perfectly awful what one will do for a man if one cares. I asked her to forgive me before I left. . . . I don't know why I tell you all this, but you remind me of her somehow. When I came in, I felt as if she might be sitting here, you know—and she stood by the piano just as you did when I went into the room at the farm. Going there was a wild move, of course, but I was raving mad about Dick, as I've told you, and the idea of getting the children came suddenly and I went off at once without considering—just as I came off here to-day. I always do things in a hurry. It's often a mistake. I wanted the children, as well as him, that day I went to the farm—I wanted them so badly I believe I would have gone to hell, and danced in it, if I could have had them when I came back." She dabbed away her tears with a lace handkerchief; Miss Fingal saw, and it repelled her, that the eyes had been touched up. "It isn't that I care for anything for very long, but if I care at all, I care so awfully. It's

like a storm, it carries me right away. I'm trying hard to get over it—we women are fools, aren't we?"

"You say you cared for some one before you saw him?"

"Well, I shouldn't be here at all if I hadn't. That was down in the country. It was through him that I went on the halls. Cherry Ripe they call me."

"Yes, I know, and—that man?"

She had got over her tears and looked up and laughed.

"He ought to have been hanged first and burnt alive afterwards—do you mind if I smoke?"

"I would rather if you didn't," Miss Fingal answered quickly, "and I must ask you to excuse me——"

"Don't be huffy, this visit is frightfully interesting."

Aline felt her fascination though she resented it, and hated her. "I am sorry—" she began, "but—I must ask you—"

"When you came round the corner on that stretcher at Leesbury, I knew I had to see you again—I felt it all along, though our lives are pretty different, aren't they? You live here all alone, don't you?"

"Yes."

"I live alone too as far as that goes, but I expect it is in a pretty different sort of way from yours. What's queer about all this is that you seem to have been awfully fond of Linda Alliston and I've been awfully fond of Dick—I believe I could be again—that's why I still hanker after the children. If I had them——"

"You will never have them!" It flashed out with a vehemence that surprised them both.

"Where are they?" Cherry Ripe asked—a sudden suspicion taking hold of her.

"I shall not tell you!"

"I expect they are still at Mentone; they were, I know, with their rotten old grandmother. Dick hated her, though he never talked about her, nor about any one else belonging to him—that is one of men's queer ways—you would have thought they were saints living in a church and other people not good enough to hear about them."

Aline locked her hands and dumbly prayed that she would go; as if she knew, Cherry Ripe said—

"Well, I'm going directly. I've been taking you in while I have been talking. The life you live here is just the best there is—but it's deadly dull. I couldn't stand it any more than I could the life at home when I was there, and that was the right sort too. I've got into a rotten fashionable set now and can't leave it. I'm in for it, unless I get hold of Dickie again. He only looks on at it, and hates it in his heart as I do—and I wouldn't mind if he beat me with sticks every week. Being fond of a man and getting him—getting him," she repeated, "is a woman's only chance. When you get it, take him at any price. I give you that for a tip. The rest is only dregs—and as for the people who think themselves somebodies, they are a silly selfish lot—dregs too."

Aline looked at her with a confused sense that she had heard this before.

"And I'm tired of them. I thought them fine at first. I know what they are now. . . . Well, I must be off. Come and hear me one night, and when you do you would think there wasn't a man in the world I couldn't get; and Dick is about the only one——"

"When did you see him last?"

"Seen him two or three times, but not to be of any good—haven't even spoken to him lately. The whole thing flared up and burnt out in no time as far as he was concerned; as for me, I am a fool—and talking of him with you has rubbed it into me. I think I shall go along and try snatching the children from their grandmother, though sometimes I am not sure if I want them—or Dick either. Still, you know, children make such a change in one's life—turn it upside-down—and that would be something." She pulled on the white gloves she had taken off in her excitement and went to the door.

It was opened by Stimson, who announced Lord Stockton. He and Cherry Ripe looked at each other with astonishment. "Well! this is a surprise for us both," she exclaimed.

He spoke to Miss Fingal before he answered—

"I certainly didn't expect to see you." He moved

his head about and looked distressed; his long figure swayed a little. "I thought you were at Hillside with my mother till the end of the week."

"Couldn't stand it, dear; tried, but couldn't." She looked up at him with the expression of a naughty child. "It was too deadly dull for this one, so I managed to have a wire sent and fled. I take up my turn again this evening; public wouldn't wait—wanted me. No more respectability of your sort for me, thank you."

He flushed with annoyance. "I'm sorry," he said stiffly.

"Not your fault, of course; you can't stand it yourself, you only like to think of it—not to go to it. Look here, come along to tea at my flat presently and we will talk it out."

"Perhaps I had better—I'll come at five," he answered and turned away.

"All right. Good-bye, Miss Fingal, glad you are better."

Stimson at his severest was waiting downstairs to show her out. As she went over the doorstep she stopped and smiled at him. "You didn't ask if I wanted a taxi," she said. "I haven't got my car to-day."

"I beg your pardon, miss," he smiled back at her.

"Well, you had better whistle." He held up his hand to a loiterer on the other side of the square, and while it was crossing he smiled at her again. "I had the pleasure of hearing you the other night, miss," he said, "and hope to do so again—" She got in, he shut the door—it was a closed cab—and looked in at her through the open window.

"That's all right; tell him Carlisle Mansions, Victoria Street. They're all alike," she said as she drove off. "I hate them. My God, how I would like to put my heel on all their necks—all but Dick—and I believe I would like to kill him sometimes and bring him to life again on some island we had all to ourselves."

Lord Stockton advanced awkwardly when he had shut the door on Cherry Ripe. "I must apologise for this

intrusion, Miss Fingal," he said. "I am the bearer of a message for you from Lady Gilston—I was glad of the excuse."

She pulled herself together. "It is very kind of you to come. I know that you called to ask after me at Leesbury."

"I was sorry to hear of your accident," he answered in a grave sympathetic voice, and put his head on one side as if to show how much he had felt it. "I hope you are quite well again."

"Yes, thank you." They sat down and politely looked at each other. "I was surprised and confused at seeing your visitor just now. I thought she was staying with my mother."

She looked at him with an unasked question on her lips.

"You know all about her, of course?" he asked. "She is really a beautiful creature, a little common; but that could easily be rectified; and very clever, she would easily adapt herself to better surroundings. She was led astray by a scoundrel, who brought her to London, and she suffered a great deal, but now she's an immense success as a singer and dancer—all the young men fall in love with her—and, as you know, it is a fashion to take up the artistic people nowadays. I think it is a good thing myself," he added in his best moral tone; "it teaches us many aspects of life with which we were unacquainted: they make us human."

"Tell me more about her."

"You probably know the rest. She got hold of Alliston and the result was a divorce and a great deal of unhappiness. You went to see her—Linda I mean."

"Yes, but only at Leesbury."

"She was a wonderful creature, I was devoted to her—loved her," he added simply. His tone made Aline like him.

"I did too," she said.

"She was quite right to prefer Alliston, but I'm afraid I don't forgive him for what he did." They were awkwardly silent for a minute. "But I'm forgetting the

message from Lady Gilston. She had a telegram from Lady Hester, and has gone to Paris, to meet her and the children."

"Are they coming to England?" she asked quickly. He was surprised at her eagerness.

"I don't know, the telegram didn't say. I was there when it came, and Lady Gilston asked me if I would explain that she was reluctantly obliged to put off the luncheon party for to-morrow. I was glad to have an excuse to call on you—it was a great comfort to hear of your visits to Linda—Bertha and Jimmy told me of them—I wanted to thank you, if I might."

He put out his hand and gratefully touched hers.

"And the children are in Paris?"

"They are, or they will be in a day or two. Lady Gilston crosses to-night."

"They will be quite safe if she is there?" it was said half to herself.

"Quite; but why do you ask?"

"Miss Repton spoke of them."

"She paid Linda a disastrous visit and offered to adopt them in case anything happened to her," he said, "an extraordinary, preposterous thing to do. But she did it in good faith; she is an astonishing mixture. You heard what she said about leaving my mother, who very kindly asked her, at my request, to stay a week—she stayed three days." He was evidently annoyed.

"You have been very kind to her."

"She interests me," he answered, and flushed again. His eyes wandered towards the clock on the mantelpiece. "She was good enough to ask me to tea at her flat. I think I must go, and find out what the catastrophe has been, now that I have duly delivered the message I was bidden to give you."

He got up and awkwardly lingered. "Would you let me come and see you again," he asked, "or at the cottage if you are there? I went to it a good deal—before Linda's marriage."

He held her hand again a little longer than was necessary; he was a good deal embarrassed. "I want to beg you not to judge Miss Repton too harshly," he said,

"she is not much more than a girl still and she was led astray—she was not strong enough to resist—every charming woman is weak and vain," he added with what Cherry Ripe called his saintly smile.

"If only she will leave the children alone!"

"She will," he answered. "I'll see to it for you."

"Why for me?" she thought when he had gone.

"Why for me?" The question asked by herself seemed to find its answer in herself as if she had looked down to the inner recesses of her heart—and its dweller.

"But if Dick wants them—and for her?" Mr. Bendish had told her a few days ago that since their mother was dead it was legally possible for the father to claim and recover his children if he were not leading an immoral life. "But he wouldn't be so cruel as to give them to her?" she cried.

VI.

LORD STOCKTON walked to Cherry Ripe's flat. He felt angry when he started. Anything concerning Linda Alliston still had power to stir him: he was astounded at Cissie Repton's visit to Leesbury, and the idea that she might adopt or have anything to do with the children seemed to him downright indecent. He wondered if Alliston had suggested it, if she had seen him, but he remembered that Jimmy Gilston told him that they had drifted apart months ago, and Cherry Ripe's manner—he had seen her pretty frequently of late on different pretexts—betrayed no signs of sentimental remembrance. Then, for he was a man of generous judgments and there was sweetness in his nature, it occurred to him that perhaps she wanted to make reparation for what she had done by devotion to the children, by endowing them with what she possessed, and making their lives easy and luxurious. It was absurd of her, of course, but it was pathetic and made her charming in his eyes. He knew her impulsiveness, her daring, it was the sort of thing she would imagine, and recklessly try to pull off; he was pleased with his own astuteness, his knowledge of womankind as he thought it, in divining this solution of an amazing incident: he quickened his pace with mild elation.

He thought of his house in Grosvenor Place, he was going back there presently; and as he walked on he considered in detail the possibilities of its different rooms, conscious the while of a pleasant emotion that softly stole upon him. Passion had no place in him; but he had tenderness and a speculative quality that accounted for many of his experiments with human

nature, and, together with a gentle persistence, helped him through many somewhat surprising adventures while his temperament effectually damped down any fire—and danger—that might have been in them. He was almost excited when he arrived at the highly-varnished front door of the flat and exercised, with an unwonted vigour, the brass serpent that served as a knocker. "Miss Repton?" He entered with an assured step.

Cherry Ripe had put herself into a grey chiffon tea-gown, a pale ribbon wandered about it, and angel sleeves fell back to show the arms which infatuated young sculptors, who watched her from the stalls, had modelled and beautified from memory. A gold cross on a thin gold chain was round her neck; a petulant foot made visible a grey suède shoe with a diamond buckle. Her loosened hair was twisted about her head, and her complexion looked fresh and natural in the carefully shaded room.

He glanced at the open window as he entered: the sun-blinds outside, the muslin and silk and tall palms within, waylaid such cool air as there was, and the scent of flowers was almost oppressive. She was sitting in an old-fashioned arm-chair, resting her head against its high back; in front of her on a low oriental table was a brass tray on which tea had been arranged and cigarettes put ready. Her whole setting was effective, she knew it and waited for him to speak. He looked at her with a soft smile of admiration.

"You make me think of a Greuze," he said.

"What's that?"

"It is what you are like." He smiled again and sat down almost facing her, as if not to lose the contemplation of the picture she made. "Now tell me why you hurried away from Hillside. I hope they were kind to you?"

"They were kind enough, but I was bored."

"Bored?"

"Bored, dear. Did you ever see Mrs. Tanqueray?"

"Yes, but what has that to do with it?"

"I felt like her when I was there. If you had even come yourself——"

"I wanted you to be with them alone."

She poured out some tea. "It was deadly." She looked at him, as if to soften her words. "Have some orange cake. . . . You see you're your sort now, and they are their sort—as you'll be by-and-by—and I'm another sort, and it's no good, I can't help it, roots stick to one though one gets up as far as one can above them: besides, I hate the country."

"You used to live in the country."

"I know, but I always wanted to get away from it. I love to go over it in my thoughts, and think I long to be back there; but I shouldn't like it. That cottage I sing about was ours—Harold Litton wrote it for me." She leant back and looked picturesque, almost beautiful, but her accent grated on him—to his worrying regret. "We had a garden, and you should have seen our strawberries, and mother gathering them, much better than the orchids in your conservatory at Hillside. The smell of the strawberries at dessert two nights ago finished me up I think—took me home—funny, isn't it? Dick Alliston used to say"—she hesitated; in her voice, and her listener was conscious of it, there was a suggestion of resentment and yet of passion—"he used to say," she repeated, "sounds and smells and lots of things had worlds of their own and careered about in them. I understood what he meant when I heard those church bells of yours on Sunday, I could have cried—and the strawberries did the rest."

"You've eaten some a good many times lately—the other night at the Savoy?"

"That's different—it was the country and looking out on a garden."

"It shows how simple you are at heart," he said, and tenderness came into his eyes.

"Not a bit, I felt as if I had once been in heaven and left it——"

"I'll take you back——"

"I'll never get back and couldn't bear it if I did—it would be too deadly dull. Don't you understand how one changes," she burst out, "and yet keeps on loving things one doesn't want and couldn't do with

again? . . . They were awfully kind—your mother and sister, but I thought the hours would never go, they were so long. I counted the minutes, they seemed to stretch out on purpose, one minute after the other to all the sixty seconds—I'd forgotten how many they had till I was there and counted them. As for drives along country lanes with no one to look at you, waste of good clothes I call it, and walks—I can't bear walks, unless it is with a boy I like, and his arm is round me." She turned a radiant smile on him.

His colour came. "I would have put my arm round you if I had been there."

"Hark the herald angels sing! Not your line, Teddy. As for dinner, oh, my Lordy!" she laughed, "and that butler and his grey head, and the footmen and their thin shoulders, and the silver things on the table, and the food, all those courses——"

"You have them at a restaurant and other places——"

"It's different," she said impatiently. "There, in the country, with the stillness all round and the scent of all those flower-beds—it made me think of supper at home long ago, out in the garden this weather—table at the back door, bread and cheese and beer—I should love a long drink of beer with the froth on." She threw up her arms and gave a little cry; then suddenly—"Have some more tea, Teddy."

He shook his head.

"Well then, cigarettes." She lighted one for herself and held the match out to him. He took it and, as if he thought better of it, put it and the cigarette down on the tray. "And after dinner," she went on, "we sat in that great drawing-room, trying to think of things to say, and it seemed as if nine o'clock would never strike—and when it did, there was ten to wait for, and when at last that struck, we got up and went to bed, just when things were beginning to wake up in London—I could have screamed when I remembered it. While we sat there, they said things they thought might be good for me and I said things that I thought might make them sit up—couldn't help it."

"Why didn't you sing to them?"

"I did. I don't think they cared about it."

"What did you sing?"

"Never mind—they weren't pleased; but it did them good." She laughed and looked at the tip of her cigarette just as Bertha did when she was considering something. "They thought it vulgar. I like being vulgar among that sort, I know then that I am myself and not my frills—some women are only their frills and haven't any selves left—and they get to like your sort." She stopped for a moment. "It's no good trying to make me better and all that, I'm not the kind." Her face was suddenly careworn. "Sometimes I wish I was dead and done with it—unless there's more going on after; I don't want any more, I'm fed up with this life."

He put out his hand. "I should like to take you away—from everything," he said gently.

"Don't want to go—or anything different."

"There is so much in you. I feel that you want caring for—loving," he brought it out with a jerk. He leant forward and put his hands on hers.

"I say, Teddy, you are going it," she said with an uneasy laugh—"I don't mind, I'm used to it; but what about the Girton girl?"

"She has nothing to do with it." He hesitated a moment, "that is all over—I want *you*—to marry you and take you away; round the world if you like, away from everything that has been a mistake in your life, and to bring you back——"

"You can bet you'd bring me back," and then a little huskily—"Oh, my little sister Ann, I wonder what put this into your head. You began by preaching, you know; you seem tired of that—and now as I live, Teddy, you are asking me to marry you, aren't you?"

He nodded and bent his head to kiss her hands. His breathing came quickly—he had said it, risked it, dared it, and waited for her answer with a choking in his throat that made him dumb.

She threw her cigarette into the fireplace among the flowers.

"‘Another music-hall actress marries a peer,’ in big letters, eh? It wouldn’t do, Teddy, I’ve been about too much in London and lost the taste for it—and seen your home—seen the other end of your world. Didn’t I tell you so just now? I’d like to marry you for the fun of the thing, to hear what they’d say, know I was a peeress, and all that, but it doesn’t glitter any more. I’d get used to it in six months and be bored stiff. And as for going down to that big house and living the life your people live, and you’d want me to live it, no thank you, I couldn’t stand it."

"Not with my love—my care?"

She shook her head. "No. It isn't as if—I'm fond of you in a way, but I'm not gone on you as I was on Dick; I would have walked to the workhouse with him or sailed to the leper island, wherever it is, if he had wanted me, at one time—but that's over."

"You can't go on living as you are—you'll have to marry."

"Yes, I expect I'll marry, but I'll marry in the profession. I'm in it, it's my sort, the sort I've become and I'm going to keep to it. It has life—heaped up. I dare say he'll be all right at first, whoever he is, and then we'll quarrel, and one of us will divorce the other—that gives a chance for a change. Men don't do after they have got used to you, they get deadly dull or they are brutal; but it's so easy to take on or put off in my set, and there isn't the fuss about it there is in yours. I can get all the money I want. A big house would only be a worry. I can't even bear this big flat, I want a little one, then one can change about and there's not much trouble. As for clothes and things, they come easy—we can always get them."

"And you won't consider—" There was relief as well as disappointment in his voice.

"No, I won't consider, dearie. Wonder what people would say if they knew I'd chucked you?"

"Do you want to tell them?"

"No, and they wouldn't believe me if I did, so you are on the safe side. Let us talk of something else."

There was an awkward pause, and then he asked—

"Why did you go to Miss Fingal to-day and frighten her about Alliston's children?"

"Why should she be frightened about them?"

"Why did you go?" he persisted.

"Look here, I told you about that before—when you worried me—I went—well, because I went to Leesbury."

"Do you care for him still?"

"I don't know, Teddy, on my life, I don't know. I expect the children would be awfully in the way if I got them."

"They would, and of course you will not get them; it would be preposterous."

"Class feeling," a gust of temper passed over her—"you think I'm not fit for them. You're old-fashioned, though you try hard to get over it."

He fidgeted his head about. He was angry with her, he could not help it. "Why did you want them?" he repeated.

"It was just an idea, it's the only thing that would make a difference in me perhaps, set me going on a straight path as you would call it, and all that," she answered with a cynical laugh.

"You might have children of your own if you did what I proposed."

"No—I can't," she snapped, "leave me alone. I was a fool and worse about that. You'd never have a child if you married me."

He stared at her, then away from her and round the room. "It's all hopeless," he said, "for us both."

"I expect it is, but I don't mind. I take life as it comes, and get a good deal out of it."

"What do you suppose will be the end?"

The question and his earnestness amused her; she wagged her pretty foot. "I dunno, Teddy, haven't thought about that. You mean when I'm old? I expect I'll dry up right down to the roots, and go and live with a relation or something like that: they'll be roots too and we'll mix. It isn't worth thinking about, waste of words, waste of thinking. And look here, you'd better depart, I must get a sleep before I go on to-night, or I shan't get a round. Thank you for asking me to

marry you, sorry I can't oblige. And you needn't encore your offer, it wouldn't be any good. Good-bye." She held up her hand. "Would you like to kiss me?"

He hesitated a second, then stooped and kissed her cheek.

"He's an awful ass," she said to herself when he had gone, "but I'm rather fond of him. . . . Lydia," she called. The old servant came in with a waddling walk. "Come and clear away. I say, Lyddy, Lord Stockton asked me to marry him."

"What did you say, dear?"

"Said I wouldn't."

Lydia gave a grunt. "Just as well; you wouldn't stick to him, and there'd only be a fuss—you don't care for him much?"

"Worst of it is I'll never care about any one much again. I've done that sort of thing twice, but one can't go on."

"Well, you'll care for something else—your money which will make you comfortable; or your work."

"Work! What's the good of *my* work? It doesn't count, besides it only lasts a little while and away it goes to some one else——"

"If it leaves money behind it doesn't matter."

But Cherry Ripe answered nothing. She stood looking out under the sun-blind towards Westminster Cathedral. "Wonder if church is any good?" she thought presently, "don't believe it is—nothing is, except the man you want. I told Miss Fingal that—wonder what she thought; she'll never get a man at all I should say: unless it's some one who wants her money."

VII.

FOR a day or two Aline could think of nothing but Cherry Ripe's visit; but now always there was in her heart—and before it everything else fell away—a vision of Linda's children. With it came a suggestion she hardly recognised to herself, but it was always there and most insistent when she struggled to avoid it.

Gradually too, almost as a reproach, she felt that the Bedford Square house was very large. There were so many rooms, so many things in them, there was so much comfort and even luxury, it seemed preposterous that she should monopolise it all. . . . And there was the cottage, that too was empty—it was not surely in the nature of things that these two houses should be meant for her to live in alone—she was only in charge of them, a custodian put in to make ready, to be ready herself? She had done an unseen bidding. At the cottage the flowers were blooming, the fruit was ripe, the sun shining, and everything seemed to be waiting. . . . The meaning of it as yet was hidden, but there stole in upon her a strange secret happiness.

And here in Bedford Square it was the same. The house was swept and garnished and freshened. The new old furniture that Mrs. Bendish and Bertha had discovered and bought for her, seemed only to remember lives that had been dignified or beautiful, there were always masses of flowers about, and sunshine invaded the rooms.

Cherry Ripe's visit disturbed her, frightened her; but after a time she shook off its effects. Bertha and Jimmy, for she gave them a tremulous almost excited account of it, scouted the idea that Dick Alliston would allow

the woman who had brought about Linda's unhappiness to have anything to do with his children; they treated the whole incident as a mad interlude, a preposterous doing, that was not likely to affect any other human being.

Jimmy Gilston was quite taken aback by the change in her. "She's alive, set going, and really pleasant company," he thought, and told her, in his moderate way, that he greatly approved of the alterations. "You have got rid of so many objectionable things, that I absolve you from burning the rest and burying the servants." After that he became a frequent visitor. He insisted one day on taking her to lunch at a restaurant—he liked restaurants. "We'll go to the Savoy," he said. "It may amuse you, the food is excellent, and the people mostly vulgar; still it would be worse the other way round for you would get indigestion and be dull into the bargain—besides, you may see Miss Cissie Repton——"

But this frightened her. "Oh no," she said. "Don't take me there—I want never to see her again."

"Then you shan't." Jimmy was always sympathetic. "We will go to the Ritz; it thinks an immense deal of itself, is a little too conscious of its magnificence—but we'll go there." It occurred to him that the bill would not be a pleasing sight, but Jimmy was a courageous creature, and never worried over trifles, especially before a woman. Gradually he became fond of her—it could hardly be called falling in love, that was not Jimmy's way; but she interested him and pleased some old-fashioned theory lying dormant in him that women should be feminine and soft-voiced, and not too clever or too self-helpful. He had liked her the night he met her first at the Bendish dinner, though he had called her a poor little stick-in-the-mud; her simplicity and manner had almost won him at Leesbury: and the change in her after the railway accident completed the conquest of him, if it could be called one. "If she would have had me, and I had not been a consolidated fool, I believe I could have married her and been content," he thought, condescendingly and rather amused at himself; "now, of course, it is impossible, I am not

going to marry a woman who has more money than I have, and if I would she wouldn't look at me. Luckily I am not sentimental and can do without that sort of thing; and there's no reason why we shouldn't be good friends. I may be useful to her, and it will amuse me to look after her a bit." This being his point of view, he found it pleasant to linger in her drawing-room, to let her play to him sometimes—she had developed a charming touch—to lunch or dine with her—he discovered that Mrs. Turner was an excellent cook—or to take her to places of which, he assured her, a knowledge was necessary to her social education. The worst of it was that the sundry feasts and expeditions, that he thoroughly enjoyed and for which she was the excuse, occasionally exceeded his capacity to pay for them. He realised this when the visit to the opera which Miss Fingal had projected took place. It was hurried on so that Bertha might be of the party the night before she went to the country. She and Jimmy and Mrs. Bendish, who had been invited to make a fourth, dined with Miss Fingal, and the car—the new car in which she delighted—conveyed them to Covent Garden. Jimmy insisted on inviting them to supper with him at the Carlton afterwards. This brought him up against the fact that his resources were exhausted and that the basket on the roll-top table in his sitting-room still held a batch of unpaid bills, though he had been doing his best to reduce their number. Luckily Sir James, who was going to fetch his wife from Paris, had not yet started, so with a spice of amusement and some trepidation, Jimmy took himself to his father's office—he always went to the office on these occasions—and determined that while he was about it he would ask for a thumping sum.

Sir James shied and stroked his nose, nearly pulled it in his anger. "You have an excellent allowance," he said, "and it's only a few months ago that I gave you a large cheque to go abroad with your sister. You came back much sooner than you were expected on account of Linda Alliston. You couldn't have spent all I gave you—what became of it?"

"I wasted it paying an old Oxford debt." He sat facing his father and tried not to feel amused.

"You disgraced yourself there. I tried to make a gentleman of you."

"Too early in the family history. You should have been content to put me on the money-making track——"

"I sent you to a public school and to Oxford, so that you might associate with gentlemen."

"Worst of it was that they would not associate with me. I got into the wrong set because the right one wouldn't have me: if it hadn't been for Alliston, I should have gone altogether to the devil; as it was, I only hung about the front door. You should have known better," Jimmy leant back and smiled benevolently, "for you are very clever, Pater, I don't wonder they knighted you."

"I deserved it," Sir James answered with snorting conviction. "I made this business. I spent £100,000 in advertising and gave £60,000 last year to five of the best-known public Institutions."

"If you had taken my advice——"

"Your advice, sir, about what?"

"About the £60,000 to prominent Institutions. You spread it out too thin; you should have plumped it down on one, piled it up. It would have made more stir—then you might have got a baronetcy. Any one can get a knighthood."

Sir James was rather struck. "Perhaps you are right, it might have been better if I had given it to one, the press would have taken more notice of it. To come back to you, sir, what is it you want?"

"Well," Jimmy answered slowly, "I might make six hundred do."

"Six hundred! You must be out of your mind."

"If they offer to make you a baronet, you will have to settle a good round sum on me, or you won't get it. I shouldn't wonder if they do—with the next batch of corruptibles."

"What do you want six hundred for?"

"To spend," Jimmy said innocently. "What does any one want money for except to spend?"

Sir James got up in despair and then sat down again. "Spend!" he exclaimed.

"Look here, my dear Pater, I've been a rotter and I know it. I am trying to work now, but I'm not much good——"

"I did everything I could for you."

"I know, dear old chap, you did far too much. Public school and Oxford only put on a little veneer that soon rubbed off. I wasn't the real thing for that journey. We are nobodies, and yet we are the most important people on earth to-day because we are workers. At least, you've been one, and perhaps I shall be one, if I ever come to my senses. You should have sent me to a cheap commercial school, that was my due, then brought me here as office boy; I might have been Lord Mayor in time perhaps, and the firm would have been Gilston & Son instead of Gilston & Co. What's the good of a Co.? Any one can get a Co., but a son has to be begotten in lawful wedlock if he is to walk about the city and be respectable."

"I expect you to go to the Bar," Sir James said ruefully.

"Well, I'm struggling, but I shan't get through."

"You might have tried for the Church——"

"The devil is much too fond of me. I shouldn't have minded being a soldier. I shall be one if there's a war; Alliston says there will be, one morning when we least expect it."

"Alliston is an ass."

"An ass is sometimes a wise beast—Scriptural authority."

"What do you want to spend this money on?"

"I want to pay up the rest of my debts, wipe them out with part of it, and with the rest I want to——" he hesitated on purpose.

"To what?"

"Well—to fling about a bit with a woman."

Sir James stood up, choking with rage. "Who is she, sir?"

"Rather a nice little female—Miss Fingal."

He sat down quickly again and smiled. "Oh, well, if that's it, I don't mind. You couldn't do better than marry her."

"I shan't ask her."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm certain she wouldn't have me, and it would make relations rather strained afterwards. Besides, I shouldn't like to marry a woman with money."

"I'd make things thoroughly comfortable for you, my boy."

"Awfully good of you, Pater, but I haven't the ghost of a chance, and I'm not going to take any risks."

"I don't mind doing something for you now—though I think you should be able to spend some money on her without coming to me." Sir James was visibly relenting: he had no belief in a young man not trying to get a young woman he liked, and a fixed conviction that every woman wanted to be married.

"I shan't come again," Jimmy answered, "but I want to feel easy about things, and when I have paid off a few bills—there are not many left—I shall have a clean slate."

There was a good-natured grunt of approval.

"And to-night—which is really why I have come to you—I have offered to give a supper at the Carlton. Miss Fingal is taking Mrs. Bendish, Bertha, and myself to the opera. We dine with her first; the least I can do is to invite her to supper afterwards; and it wouldn't do for two young and tender things, as she and I are, to go alone."

At which Sir James laughed and thought what a witty dog Jimmy was. "And so you are taking Mrs. Bendish and Bertha too, eh? Well, look here, you shall have the cheque—and I'll give the supper at the Carlton. I suppose you won't object to that, or mind if I come too? I'll telephone for a round table and ask Bendish to join us; it will be only fair as his wife is going to the opera."

"One to you, Pater; you are a brick. Tell them to make the food especially good."

Sir James was busy with his cheque-book. "Leave it to me, my dear boy; I know what I am about!" He looked up to give Jimmy a little wink: and Jimmy went on his way rejoicing.

The whole affair was a great success. Mrs. Turner sent up a dinner that surprised Jimmy into admiration and made him feel that the evening was beginning well. The box was on the grand tier; it was a Wagner night; everybody was there, and going on afterwards to balls and parties: festivity was in the air. Music held Aline more and more, and the show delighted her. "We'll come again," she told Mrs. Bendish. They were in the centre of the house, so there was no straining to get a view of the stage.

"So sensible of you to wait till you could manage it," Jimmy said. "In a box at the side a man is expected to stand while your sex takes the front seats, and he has to crane his neck round the corner and pretend he doesn't mind."

"We'll always have a centre box and we will come often," she answered recklessly. Her eyes were shining, she was animated: the Sloane Street dressmaker, who had once been on the stage and was an artist with an eye for colour and form, had seen to her toilette. Aline had toned it down with Burdett's help; but it was the better for it. She had never heard the opera before. It enchanted her; it was a new and wonderful emotion. The forest was like a home she remembered; when she heard Siegfried coming she glanced quickly up at her shoulder as though she expected to see his human counterpart beside her; when he bent over Brünnhilde she felt her heart throb with excitement till she heard Jimmy's voice saying: "He won't stick to her, but he has done it very well."

Her eyes filled with tears. "Oh, how can you!" she said. "You have driven them away—you have sent them back—and they must have been so glad to get a little spell of life again."

He stared at her. "You speak as if they were real." "Perhaps they have been," she answered, "and may be again. I feel as if everything goes on somewhere, and

somehow, but differently: that is why it is all so difficult to understand."

"She's a strange creature," Jimmy told his sister when he was seeing her off from Victoria next morning, "so patchy in her thoughts, and sometimes one could imagine that she had been infected with a little of Alliston's rot. By the way, he was in the stalls last night. I didn't spot him till he was just going out."

"I saw him," Bertha answered. "He looked at us, but I suppose he didn't like to come up."

VIII.

AN heiress, fairly young, and rather attractive was not to be overlooked; so the residents of Wavercombe who had London houses scrupulously called on Miss Fingal when they heard of her arrival in Bedford Square and invited her to luncheon or dinner, or sent her cards for their evening parties. It was mid-June, 1914. The season was at its height, the traffic in the fashionable thoroughfares was congested, and the Park filled twice a day with well-dressed crowds; the window-boxes in the squares were a mass of colour; in the evening there were awnings at many houses, and strips of red drugget across the pavement. It was all new and exciting to her; Battersea had known nothing of such doings; but she soon grew tired of them. She liked her London house with its old-fashioned air, and the summer freshness that had fallen upon it, as of an old world and a new one meeting. She enjoyed receiving her callers, or playing hostess when she ventured to give some modest entertainment. But the gathering together of people night after night, to eat and drink, or to talk about nothing in particular, struck her as being curiously fatuous. She remembered that in the novels she had read long ago at the flat, there had been pictures of the manner of life with which she was becoming acquainted; they represented it as full of delirious delight, she had lingered over them as over an impossible dream. The dream in a measure had come true; but she was awake and it did not appeal to her, any more than it had done to Linda. The self of those days had been different, it seemed to be merged in some intangibility that remained

of the woman whose influence over her had been the first personal one she had known.

Jimmy called himself her London pilot, and was more and more content in her company; she was a restful little person, grateful and naïve. It was amusing to take her about, she looked nice—and so natural; didn't make up, as most women did, or wear semi-indecent clothes, and she had no tricks. She didn't expect to be everlastingly given chocolates, though he was quite willing to give her as many as she wanted; or to be made love to, he was not in the least inclined to do that; he would have thought it ridiculous and laughed at himself. He wondered sometimes at her pre-occupation, at the day-dreaming air with which she accepted most things. She was interested in her new view of London life and such of its gaities that fell to her, but it was obvious she had not much desire for their continuance, though she was a fair success. There was something magnetic about her: the demure figure had never been other than graceful, lately it had even acquired some beauty; and her dressmaker was evidently first-rate. Besides all this, there had come over her a phase that puzzled him; it might be the fresh interests, he thought, the heaps of books, mostly of poetry and mysticism, she was always buying, and eagerly reading before putting them on the shelves that a little time before had held the dry and dusty volumes belonging to uncle John; or the leaning towards art and music she was showing. Anyway something was having an effect upon her, and that something to the good, it didn't matter precisely what it was—she was no longer a little stick-in-the-mud, and in an unexcited manner he was happy. On her, the effect he made was one of grateful friendliness with an utter absence of surprise at anything he did or said. She felt as if she had known him always, as if her memory, though she did not take account of it, held him, too, in its background. They went for many strolls in the parks and long jaunts in the motor. They seldom talked much, but he liked her silence; she responded quickly enough to pictures or music or any entertainment to which he chanced to take her, and if she asked questions

they were sufficiently intelligent. He was startled occasionally by a suggestion of questing in her eyes, just as in a far greater degree there was in Dick Alliston's. Sometimes he saw her turn her head and with a little smile look downwards as if some lower thing in stature were by her side; it made him feel, as she felt, that these days were but a prelude, or a passage-way, an interval between that which had been and that which was to come.

He asked her once what her life had been at Battersea. She hesitated for a moment, perplexed: then the young couple to whom she had given her furniture jerked themselves into her vision; but she could not remember what they were called. She told him about the days in the flat, their monotony and quiet, and about the park over the way; how her ears had been filled with the sounds that came from it, her eyes with its greenness in summer, and its brownness and bareness in winter. But it seemed as if she only remembered it all with an effort—as if she held her eyes down to the picture she had conjured back to her mind.

He looked at her as if he wondered whether she had been awake then, or even alive. "And do you mean to say that you lived opposite that park for all those years and never entered it?"

"Never—in all those years."

"Strange beings women are! You generally appear to have a particular fancy for trees and flowers and the rest of it."

"I know, but I have altered so much since then. Sometimes I wonder if I am the same woman, or if I only remember her . . . I must go and look at the old houses in Cheyne Walk again, to make sure that I am I."

"Take me?"

"I will. We'll go in the car. I'll show you the block of flats and the little top balcony on which I used to stand listening to the band in the distance, to look across at the people over the way—and feel that I was outside their world." She was thoughtful for a moment, then she leant forward. "Jimmy," she said, "sometimes I think I am outside the world now: not

always, only sometimes—looking on at it and trying to get stronger—or wandering away to strange places; I bring myself back from them with an effort and can hardly believe that I am here . . . it is wonderful to see them. . . . I spent such long wasted years at Battersea, but I hadn't enough life in me to live them differently."

"You are steering towards some sort of mystic idealism: I thought so the other day when I saw some of the books you had bought. Linda had too much of it lately, she got it from Alliston, and probably talked it to you. I wonder what the deuce it is you think you are driving at?"

"I don't know—I don't know—but do any of us know much about ourselves? I try to live up to the conception these new people have of me—to be what they will like, and then it comes over me that I'm not the woman they think, but some one quite different, and that I have no right to be living here—the cottage has never seemed quite to belong to me either, I always feel that it is Linda's still—or the children's."

"I wonder you don't go there. The children are pretty certain to turn up at Beechwood before very long, though, of course, you never know what Lady Hester will do; she may palm them off on my stepmother, or send them to Timbuctoo for some reason of her own. If she married the Argentine millionaire—who appears to be dangling after her—she might take them with her to South America. But she always gets bored with responsibility, and she would find a way of sending them back."

"It would be too dreadful if she took them all that way!" she exclaimed.

He looked puzzled. "But why should you worry about it? Are you very fond of them?"

"They are always before my eyes—"

"The railway accident, I expect," he said consolingly.

"Look here, why don't you go abroad for a bit?"

"Sometimes I think I'll go to Paris and see them."

"You mightn't find them. And if you did you couldn't very well take Lady Hester in hand—she might, of course, be glad to shovel them off on you, for

it isn't as easy as it sounds to cart about two children and a nurse, in the way she likes to do things, at this crowded time of year, and with her somewhat cramped resources. She may have brought off a coup at Monte Carlo, of course, or have politely rooked the millionaire, or married him; but if she hasn't she won't be able to stay very long in Paris; even if she makes my father pay up at first, he'll get tired of it. We don't know why she went there yet, or sent for my stepmother. . . . But take things calmly and don't worry."

"I feel so restless."

"I expect women often do if they are not anchored to relations, or to the necessity of getting a living, or unless they have something else to absorb their spare energies. Look here, why don't you get training of some sort, or learn a language? Alliston says there'll be a war over this Servian business: if there is, I don't suppose it'll come our way, but there would be plenty of work for women out there and in odd corners of the Continent; you would get new experiences and picturesque difficulties that would interest you: it's an excellent dodge to turn one's memory into a storehouse."

"Till I left Battersea there was nothing in mine."

"And of course you are handicapped by your sex: women always want to exercise their emotions."

"Don't men too?"

"Well, yes, but men come under a different category; they have to face some hard facts of life, from which the majority of women are still more or less safeguarded, and that keeps them from being thrown back too much on the softer side—and finding it disappointing."

"I am not disappointed, Jimmy, only trying to find out the things I ought to do,—I had no friends at all till this last year. I can't think now how I could live through all those blank years without knowing any one at all—nor why I didn't do something."

"It would have been better," he allowed, "even if it had only been charing."

"Mrs. Bailey, with the red flower in her bonnet, did that for me."

"Yes—" he answered absently, evidently not knowing

anything about Mrs. Bailey. He looked at her doubtfully, a smile lurked in his eyes, a question seemed to be on his lips that amused him.

"What is it, Jimmy?" she asked.

"I was wondering if you would like to marry me," he answered.

She looked up in amazement. "Why—no, I wouldn't," she said.

"I thought not." His tone was triumphant. She laughed as she heard it.

"Then why did you ask me?"

"I thought I'd better. You don't seem to know what to do with yourself, to be in a sort of maze; it would have been one way out."

"It wouldn't do at all."

"Oh, I don't suppose it would," he agreed pleasantly, "so that's all right."

"I'm really fond of you, just as I am of Bertha, but I don't want to——"

"You needn't apologise. As a matter of fact I couldn't do it, unless I had five thousand a year, or you gave your money to a charity."

"It's so funny of you—I didn't think——"

"My dear child, don't worry—it doesn't make any difference. You have really done me a good turn, for now I can tell the Pater you wouldn't have me, and then he'll be satisfied."

"Did he——?"

"Of course. He's very fond of you." This was true: he thought it unnecessary to tell her any more.

"It's very kind of him."

"Don't mention it, and again I entreat you not to worry. Young women don't take an offer of marriage very seriously now, they have so many other things in their heads. Forget all about it and let us go on as before. I like coming to see you—and Mrs. Turner has my sincere regard."

"You are very greedy." She blinked the soft eyes that had gained more expression lately, and laughed. "Oh, it's too funny!" she repeated.

"That's the way to take it," he laughed back. "Now

then there's an end of that—it has evidently put you into good spirits, which is something. Shake off delusions, my dear: shall I come and take you out somewhere to-night?"

"I am going to a dinner-party at Mrs. Derrick's."

"Are you?" he answered in a sympathetic tone. "I shouldn't wonder if Cyril Batson takes you in." He reflected for a moment. "I am sorry for him, poor ass. Cherry Ripe has played the deuce with him; he only pretended at first—but he is really in love with her now—it probably serves him right, but that doesn't console him. Well, good-bye. I shall come again in a day or two, and never mind about your uneasy feeling; lots of people have it and don't know why. Alliston says that it's the political storm brewing; civil war, or a row in Eastern Europe, or Ireland, and that London is rehearsing a dance of death before the avalanche. But he always rushes ahead, and will tell you the notes of the last trump before they are sounded."

"Sometimes I wish I could see him."

"I'll bring him round if you like."

"No, no," she answered quickly, "I couldn't bear it yet——"

"Very well, but don't look so frightened; there have been criminals of a deeper dye—a man has even been known to bolt with a woman before, and yet remain unchanged."

"Don't let us talk about it," she answered. Her whole expression had changed.

He looked at her with kindly criticism, and departed. "I'm glad I got that over," he said to himself. "I am getting fond of her, but I don't know what the deuce I should have done if she had accepted me. That sort of thing isn't in my line. However, I'm even with the old man, he can't worry me about it any more. If I don't get through, I shall cut all ropes and drift—to New Zealand probably."

Jimmy guessed rightly. Cyril Batson did take her in and surprised her by reproaches for doing up the cottages at Leesbury. "It was cruel of you," he said,

remembering what he imagined to be his rôle as a poet, "they were so beautiful; why did you disturb them?"

"Did you ever see them?"

"No, I never did; but Bendish told me about them. He has no imagination, and thought it splendid of you to spend money upon them; for he is a legal person and money appeals to him, but to spend it on spoiling beauty is to spend it on desecration."

"The cottages were letting in the wind and rain, and killing the poor women who live in them."

"Desolation and decay are so beautiful. I can imagine the crumbling walls and the roofs dropping away bit by bit, a tribute to the power of time, prostrating themselves at the feet of the future, and the old women battling with the elements—the great eternal elements. Surely it would be finer than sitting over the fire, with only their commonplace thoughts and desires for food and comfort. And the porches——"

"Porches?"

"I can imagine them. Little old porches covered with jasmine and clematis or traveller's joy—such a lovely name for it—traveller's joy," he repeated—"all destroyed, gone for ever,—the vampire builder will come and they will vanish——"

"But the porches were never there," she said.

The man on the other side of her, a Sir George Somebody—she didn't catch his name—wholesome-looking and slightly grizzled, gave her a little wink and whispered: "He has raked up a second-hand copy of *The Yellow-book*. Ask him what he thinks of the murder of the Austrian Archduke?"

"Why?"

"I heard him tell some one just now that it was too distant to be interesting. It is curious," he went on in an undertone, "that the intellectual capacity of these anæmic young men is seldom strong enough to reach beyond their own importance and a looking-glass: nothing else matters to them, that's why they write their own biographies and call them novels." He looked past her and asked, "What do you make of the Servian business, Batson?"

"Nothing; it is a country with a past that doesn't appeal to me; the last tragedy in its history was sordid and violent, and the players were unworthy of romance," he added drearily.

"Humph! The more recent one may prove to be the match to the torch: what then?"

"I shall love the torch's flare and go to contemplate it from some dim corner. Torches lighted by the by-gone ages—" He turned an eye down on Miss Fingal to see that she was listening

"Depend upon it, they don't make them as well as they did," Sir George remarked.

"They make nothing as well, do nothing as splendid. The eternity of the bygone centuries must be wonderful, with so much greatness in it—to be in it, a part of it, will be the compensation for mortal life, which is always overrated." He turned to the *entrée* and carefully selected the morsel he liked best.

The grizzly one whispered to Miss Fingal: "This talk is only a trick, he learns a yard or two of it every night before he comes out."

Cyril Batson unconsciously hurried her to the cottage. She made up her mind that night. She was nearly at the end of her invitations, she could throw over the rest. It was the first week in July; the uneasy feeling, unconsciously felt in London, hurried people into last gaieties, last excesses, before they rushed to the country to recruit, or to shelter from a possible storm. She longed to get to Wavercombe before them. The Gilstons were not yet back from Paris, but, having broken the chain of London engagements, they would probably go straight to Beechwood, especially if they brought back Linda's children; and, apart from this, the talk that evening made her feel the foolishness of the social game when it was carried on merely for its own sake. The thought of the cottage brought back a passionate desire to see it, to be there—to wander through its peaceful little rooms, with the wide-open windows and the glorious vegetation of summer looking in upon them—to sit in the garden,—there was the ilex on one side, and the glorious shady acacia in the middle

of the lawn, there were thick upstanding fences of sweet-peas screening the way to the kitchen garden. Webb had told her there were some late strawberries nearly ready: he had been making a chicken-run and a shed with nest boxes against it, close to the orchard, and some fat white hens were running about beneath the apple-trees—she longed to see it all. If only she could show it to them . . . to them? . . .

“Burdett!” she said, while that tactful maid was unfastening the white dress, and taking off the seed pearls in which four hours ago she had stood before the glass, admiring herself, “I don’t think I want any more dinner-parties.”

“No, madam? It’s very close in London just now.”

“I wish we were at the cottage!”

“Yes, madam; it’s lovely there.”

“We’ll go. I can’t live any longer away from it.” She sat down on the sofa at the foot of the bed. And Burdett, knowing her ways by now, left her mistress to day-dream.

She sat very still. “But it’s the children I want,” she said. “The children—” she repeated under her breath, as if she were trying to project her voice into the far-off. She shut her eyes and leant her head down on the cushion . . . farther—farther—till she was in some portion of the world that was full of dreamy calm, with pathways stretching to green and shady distances. She was hurrying along with noiseless steps—swifter—swifter. “The children,” she whispered, “the children, perhaps I shall see them here!” She rested on a bank by the wayside and waited—she heard them coming—she saw them plainly—at last—they came nearer—shyly towards her—she was afraid to move or to speak lest it should frighten them away. Sturdie stood by her, clasping her knees, and Bridget climbed on to her lap and put up the little arms that were too short to meet round her neck. . . . “My darlings,” she whispered, “I have been waiting such a long time.” . . . She gave a long sigh as the waking-dream went into nothingness—such a happy dream it was: in the darkness she smiled as she remembered it.

IX.

THE next morning she telegraphed to Jimmy, asking him to lunch with her, for to-morrow she was going to the cottage. He came promptly.

"You are quite right," he said, "but why so suddenly?"

"I don't know, something is driving me there. Have you heard from Lady Gilston?"

"No, but I've heard from Bertha. A very curious thing, the Pater went pelting off to Switzerland to fetch the two school-girls back, my half-sisters, you know. They were in Paris when he wrote, they may be at Beechwood any day—may be there now for all I know."

"But Linda's children?"

"He doesn't say a word about them, or she doesn't at any rate. Don't fidget about it, it will all come right. Things do if you leave them alone. Is that food?" as the gong sounded. "I'm very hungry!"

He look at her when she had sat down at the head of the table in the dining-room—it always seemed too large for the one little figure—he was at the side, quite near her, and could study her profile, and the line of white throat that reminded him of a coin he could not identify. She satisfied his eyes very much. "I am sorry she is going," he thought, "it will be so dull without her." Then half hesitating he asked—"Do you mean to motor to the cottage to-morrow?"

She made a little sound of satisfaction. "All the way—every mile."

"Should I be in the way if I went with you? There's a good train back at seven. I looked it up."

She held out her hand to him, almost affectionately.

"Yes, Jimmy dear, you would. I want to be alone—all the way there—to be cut off from everything for a little while but my own thoughts—the isolation of a journey rests one so much. . . . I shall think of you as I pass the pond; you don't mind my not letting you come?"

"No." His voice showed understanding, and she liked him for it. "There are times when every human being wants to be alone, but I'm sorry you are going away—you are rather a good little pal." She took it as high praise. "And look here, I mustn't stay long now for, strange to say, I'm working, and must get back to my rooms at half-past two."

"I am going down to Piccadilly in the car—I can take you back—it's not much farther, and oh! Jimmy, I told Mrs. Turner to send up the Russian pudding you like."

"It was very thoughtful of you. She made it rather too sweet last time. Let us hope she won't to-day." He tried to look pleased; but it did not save the little luncheon from a last-time air: the dining-room itself had it. And Stimson was not as alert as usual; he was depressed at having to leave London a fortnight sooner than he had anticipated, and worried at being told to take charge of Burdett; a lady's maid was an innovation to which he had not yet accustomed himself.

"I am longing to see it again," Aline said after a long minute's silence. In imagination she had hurried over every stage of the journey—the way from London, the houses fewer and fewer and farther apart, the long stretches of road—the heather and huckleberries, the briar that would be in bloom—the fir woods, with their long straight stems like slim dark columns, the light showing through them and the blackness at the top that almost roofed them: and presently the Hampshire lanes, and the wall of Beechwood, and the gates that had come from Italy . . . in at those gates the children would go if they came back with Lady Gilston.

"To see what?" Jimmy asked with a start.

"The place—the country—everything. You must come one day, you and Bertha—if I am there. I am

not sure that I can stay through the garden-party season."

"I don't think you can," he answered solemnly. "It is a comfort to find a woman who feels its enormity." He was silent again for a minute or two before he said almost to himself: "I wonder what you will do with the future."

She woke up a little at that. "I want to see what it will do with me," she said. "I have been thinking that this house, and the cottage too, can't be meant for me to live in all my life alone."

He stared at her, but the clear eyes faced him without any sign of confusion. "Why not?" he asked.

"It's too much, too large a share."

"It sounds as if the modern feeling were laying hold of you; I am afraid it is of me—I don't like it, though I can't help it."

"I don't understand."

"Well, you are becoming dissatisfied with your show, as I am with mine. You had better get something harmless to do. I told you so yesterday."

"But what is the modern feeling—and what has it to do with my living here alone?"

"That is it; you are taking up too much room in the world, using too many things, taking from it all you can get, in fact, and not giving it enough in return, and, being a sensible young woman, you are growing restless and will become rather ashamed of yourself. You will have to discover some method of paying your way, not only with money but with work of some sort. Of course rich people have the chance of doing things without payment—often excellent things—that otherwise would not be done at all."

"Do you do anything for the world?" she asked wickedly.

"I have been a rotter most of my time, as I have told you before, but I am coming to my senses. At present I live in two rooms off the Embankment and profess to be reading for the Bar. I don't suppose I shall pull through, and if I don't I shall probably go to New Zealand and grow sheep to feed English loafers, send

them over frozen, excellent mutton—I believe it doesn't require any brains to make it answer. Most people have only hands; I doubt if mine are any good—but anyhow if one gets away from civilisation it won't be so bad; and there will be compensations."

"Compensations?"

"Sky and weather, old clothes—a lazy pipe, the feeling that nothing at all matters, and that there is not too much morality about. Morality is a great bore, especially when it comes to the finer points that belong to the civilisation group of virtues."

"You are talking nonsense, Jimmy," she said with the demure look he liked in her eyes.

"Of course I am," he answered cheerfully. "Heaven forbid I should try to bore you with sense."

"All people can't do things for the world——"

"And they are often a horrible nuisance when they try—so, as we are not collaborating for a tract, we needn't discuss it."

"Why did you begin it?"

"Well, you see I sat up late last night arguing with a lunatic who says that the people with genius, and the dreamers and idealists are the salt of the earth, and that unconsciously we most of us expect them to crack the shell of the universe and pull out the kernel inside; which is why we put up with them—and incidentally why we often starve them, for we mayn't like the inside when we get it. The other people he says should fall back and do the best they can to keep themselves and their belongings decently. If they needn't work for a living they should do something that is in effect an apology for having more than their share, as you think you have; that's where the worker who can't afford to do things that can't be paid for comes in. I was horribly bored with him, but too polite to kick him out: so I have been trying some of his rot on you—second-hand and not much good."

"I think you are a little mad?"

"I dare say, but madness often suggests things that sanity leaves alone. That's why I encouraged the lunatic."

"I have only just begun to live, Jimmy dear," she

said after a moment's pause—there was a note in her voice that touched him. "I don't want to do anything else yet. Perhaps I *have* too large a share, but for years I had much less; and now I have come to love this house, and the cottage——"

It was very surprising to himself, but he felt almost tender. "And you didn't have much fun in your life till your highly respectable uncle died," he said. "Get all you can now and enjoy it."

There was another spell of silence.

"What time must you go back to your rooms?" she asked when they were having their coffee.

"Half-past two will do."

"It's a quarter to two now and the car is at the door. Pryce must have made a mistake in the time."

"We should have time to go to Battersea and back."

"Then let us do it—one can go anywhere in three-quarters of an hour with a motor."

It was less than a year since she had left it, but it was strange to see Chelsea again: she felt like a traveller returning, and almost excited when she beheld the Embankment and the bridge that stretched airily across the river.

"Let us go slowly up and down the whole length of Cheyne Walk," she said, "but it is the old houses I want you to see."

"Not the new ones, built especially for cranks?" he asked maliciously.

"No." She turned away to look up at the houses she loved. "I am so glad to see you again," she said to them. "The trees in Bedford Square belong to the same world that you do; I am certain they sent you their love." She turned to him. "These were the only friends I had for eight years."

"I should say it wasn't a very troublesome acquaintance."

"No—but don't mock at me. I always feel that so many things have life or knowledge of some sort—though a different sort—as well as human beings. How do we know?"

"We don't know, of course," he said in his queer dry manner, "but to say that a row of houses has it is a large order."

"I don't mean that," she answered, "but the air and the wind and the rain, and all manner of strangenesses and influences bring gifts to most things. Perhaps among them is a variation of life or consciousness that is not like ours and yet reaches out—even to houses we build if they wait long enough." She looked up at them again. "They seemed so wise the day I went to Bedford Square to hear of my fortune," she went on, "and when I came back, I felt as if they knew. But I never spoke to them before. . . . Oh! I'm sure you think me rather mad now?"

"It doesn't matter. A little madness, as I have just said, has often a good deal of originality that common-sense leaves alone: the railway accident has evidently given an interesting twist to your brain——"

"Let us go and see the church." She looked up at the high red-brick blocks of flats near it. "Bertha told me that some people live in them who do wonderful work."

"Poor things——"

"They couldn't look out at the river and the trees and the great sky above them, and Lambeth Palace over the way, and all the moving things on the water, and not think a great deal," she spoke as if she had not heard him.

He put his hand on her shoulder: "My dear Aline," he said, "this is Alliston's stuff again. It helps to prove that human beings are instruments with the same notes in them, and what they give out depends on the players who touch them."

"And the company they keep," she said with the laugh that had puzzled Bertha.

They went across the bridge. The neighbourhood looked ugly on the other side. She remembered that it always did, though the shops at which she dealt had not seemed so common as they did now. They whizzed past them—the same people seemed to be walking along the pavement, the same untidy children loitering; she

looked at the children especially with interest and wondered why she used to avoid them. She had seen their side of life every day once, and taken it as a matter of course. Now it made her ache.

They were passing the Battersea flats. "This was my block," she cried; "I lived in this one—that balcony at the top belonged to my sitting-room, that little one—there is a sun-blind over it. I never thought of doing that."

"The green-and-white striped one—is that it?"

"Yes, that one. There are geraniums coming through the iron balustrade. It all looks different. I wonder if the park is the same."

"Shall we go and see?"

"No, no, I can't. Let us go back. I feel like a stranger who has no business here. The woman who lived in that flat a year ago belongs to another part of the world now—she has nothing to do with this. Turn round, Pryce," she said to the chauffeur, "go quickly over the bridge and by the Embankment to Westminster. It will do us good," she told Jimmy, "to look at the long lines of trees and the flickering bits of sunshine on the river."

Presently she remembered something: "I forgot," she said, "I wanted to send a message to Mrs. Bendish: is there a telephone office anywhere near?"

They were passing the Houses of Parliament. "There's one just at the bottom of Whitehall."

"Can I do it for you?" he asked when they had stopped before it.

"Yes, do. Tell Mrs. Bendish to expect a hamper of flowers from the cottage, for her party to-morrow—she knows I am going back to the cottage in the morning." He left her in the car. She thought of Battersea. The life there was growing dim in her memory, though she had a lingering tenderness for the woman of the blank days and the loneliness that had been hers: so strange not to remember it all more clearly.

Jimmy came out of the Post Office followed by a man, young, tall, and quick of movement, with the gait and figure of an athlete. He had very bright eyes,

and his face suggested a capacity for happiness that had struggled against tragedy. She knew perfectly who it was, before Jimmy said reluctantly and with an embarrassed air: "This is Alliston, he says he has wanted to see you." There was a moment's hesitation and silence. Then he added, "I may as well get in," as if afraid of losing his place. He shut the door with a snap.

Dick Alliston stood by the side of the car, waiting for her to speak. She felt herself shrink back, but she managed to say formally, "How do you do?"—a little movement of her head emphasised its coldness.

He looked eagerly, half absently, into the grey eyes that had an unspoken reproach in them, and there went through him the remembrance of a long straight road in Normandy, of two people seated in a car like this, that flew on and on between two rows of poplar-trees: the sun was shining just as it was to-day, and it was summer-time just as it was now . . . then he said, and it seemed amazing that he should—"Would you let me come and see you?"

She shrank back again—repelled, an insistent emotion took hold of her, as she answered in the old Miss Fingal formula: "It's very kind of you, but to-morrow—early—I am going to the country."

He knew, she felt that he did, where she was going, and that she was making an excuse. He looked at her with a little smile that was half scornful, half amused: "I heard of you at Leesbury," he said.

"At Leesbury!"

"You were at the 'White Hart' after a train accident." His eyes were still fastened on her. She could hardly bear it.

"But you—" she managed to say, "were you there—at the hotel?"

"No, I was at the farm."

"At the farm!" she repeated in a low voice, as if she doubted that she had heard aright.

"I stayed there—for a few days."

"You stayed there since——?"

He nodded for answer. "That's why I wanted to see you."

"Oh!" She made a little sound of resentment, so low that she herself hardly heard it, and turned away: there was a moment's strange silence. She heard Jimmy say to Pryce, "You had better go on—" she looked round but Dick Alliston had gone, so quickly and completely it seemed uncanny.

"I knew that you would come across him somehow," Jimmy said.

She was straining her eyes to find him in the distance, but there was no sign; she put her hands to them for a moment, as if to make sure she were awake. "Why did he want to come and see me?" she asked.

Jimmy gave a little shrug.

"He couldn't have cared for her."

"He did—you were rather cruel to him."

"I didn't mean to be that."

"It's no good judging people—they take things differently. It would have been better to let him come."

"I couldn't—how could I?" It was like a hushed cry.

He put his hand on her arm. "Don't let it worry you, dear," he said gently. "You needn't see him again. He's not likely to come to the cottage."

She dropped Jimmy at the Embankment end of Buckingham Street, and the car was turned homewards. A little wind from the river blew across her face, and she shivered though it was a warm sunny day. "How could he go to the farm?" she said to herself. "How could he do that?"

She half-stumbled as she entered the house in Bedford Square. Burdett met her on the stairs, she shook her head and went up to her own room and, locking the door, buried her head in the cushions where she had sat dreaming of the children two nights ago. "He could never have cared!" she moaned; "he left her for a common woman—and he went to the farm, though she had died there." She pressed deeper into the cushions, as if to get farther away from him, but she only saw him more plainly still—his bright eyes and short thick hair, the worn expression on his face, and the ghost of a smile that had just for a moment lighted it up. She

heard Linda say again—"My splendid Dick!" and gave herself up to the gusts of feeling that fell upon her in turn—anger with him and reproach for her manner just now—he had suffered—suffered—it hurt her to see it—she wished she had been different, there might be something—Jimmy said people saw things differently, but there was only one way to see this: "He forgot all those days that were heaven itself—he could never really have cared——"

A confused vision went swiftly across her brain. She sat up and said slowly, "He couldn't have cared even then—" As if she heard a reproach she stopped. "Dick—Dick!" she whispered, "I didn't mean it." Perplexed, she roused herself and thought, "Why should these memories come to *me?*"

X.

SHE had been three days at the cottage. Gradually it had calmed her; she was glad to rest, to be away from all the agitations of London. Peace and the allurements of summer had taken her into their keeping.

There was not a sign of the Gilstons. Webb had heard nothing. Mr. Randall, whom she met the morning after her arrival, asked if she had had any news of them: it was evident that he had none. Mrs. Marriot, the doctor's wife, who saw her pass in the motor and promptly called, knew nothing; but she remarked by way of being agreeable that one or two new people had come to live in the neighbourhood, and there were sure to be some tennis-parties next month: which was not nearly such pleasing intelligence as she imagined. She added that Lady Francis of the Tower House—she was already there after a lovely season in London—was getting up a bazaar with a gipsy band in aid of a new recreation-room beyond the church; Mr. Randall was very pleased about it, and his sister, who was a cripple, and so patient, poor thing, was coming to it from Chiswick, where she lived. Lady Gilston was sure to give a garden-party, if she came back in time. Lady Gilston was in Paris now with Lady Hester Markham, who was charming and so kind, but probably very unhappy at the death of her daughter; of course Miss Fingal had felt that too, living at the cottage that had been Mrs. Alliston's before it was Mr. John Fingal's? It was very sad that two owners of the cottage should die within so short a time of each other, such a sweet little place too; and Webb was considered an excellent gardener, his flowers had taken three prizes at the

Midhurst Flower Show, the same year that Miss Francis of the Tower House had won the Champion Cup, at tennis, at Farnham. (Here she paused to take breath.) Then she wondered there was no tennis-court at the cottage, for Mr. Alliston had been such a good player in old days, and so much in request that it had been very difficult to secure him. Did Miss Fingal know anything of Mrs. Alliston's children? Of course Lady Hester was devoted to them, but it was very sad that they should be brought up without either parent, for if Mr. Alliston married the actress who had been in the divorce case, he could not very well claim the children. It was really a good thing, but now their mother was dead he might feel a good deal about them, and want them, though unless he married again he would not know what to do with them, poor little things.

Miss Fingal heard her with dismay at first, then she remembered telling Jimmy of the callers of last year and his advice, that she should put up a board with "No visitors wanted," and amused herself by thinking how surprised they would be if they saw it.

Luckily there were no more interruptions. The residents were flocking back from their London dissipations, but they left Miss Fingal alone. They were not given to much calling till later in the year, and it was not yet time to send out invitations for their country entertainments. So she went about the cottage and the garden, happy and busy. The rooms upstairs were ready; she avoided telling herself why, she gave Burdett and Mrs. Webb no hint of what might be done with them. Along the passage was her own room, easy to get to, and from the dressing-room window—she always left the door open—she could hear the enchanting sounds of the garden. It was looking its best: the trees had not lost their freshness though July had well set in, the crimson ramblers were a mass of bloom, there were fuchsias and hollyhocks and bushes of southernwood, and all manner of old-fashioned growths beside modern ones, and beyond the lawn there was a fairy bed, a mixture of smallest flowers that she looked at lovingly, thinking the children would like it. But the greatest

joy of all was the acacia-tree in the middle of the little lawn, it was in full flower and the petals fell like heavenly kisses. And there was the orchard! The apples had formed, there were little windfalls already; the hens ran after them or were frightened and clucked and ran away. At the far end against the wall—by a moss-grown wall that was at right angles to the fence from which uncle John's barbed wire had been removed—there was a little seat. In the winter it had been riddled and rotted by the rains; but now Webb had made a new one, with a trellis roof to it, that was already covered by a flowering creeper, and nasturtiums climbed the side-posts. She sat and looked at the apple-trees in the foreground and the green tangle farther off. If presently the children came . . . but how vague were her happiest dreams—there seemed to be a screen before them, a misty screen through which she could not see clearly, and yet she knew that behind it were the wonderful possibilities. . . .

Jimmy wrote to tell her that he had heard nothing of his people; he supposed they were still in Paris; Bertha had returned to her flat: she had been for a little run in Normandy with one of her country cousins. She had brought back some sketches and was busy painting; he didn't think she was much of an artist, but it amused her to call her sitting-room a studio, and she had to do something to keep up its reputation. That was all. There was nothing about Dick; she had not expected there would be, but her thoughts had rushed to him when she saw Jimmy's writing, and her eyes had searched eagerly for a chance mention of his name. In the last few days, here in the rooms and garden that seemed to be full of consciousness of him—of him at his gayest and happiest—the long summer days and the soft twilights pleaded his cause, and again she wished she had been different in her manner to him, for he had suffered—it was written on his face, she ached to remember it. Besides, Linda had not been angry with him, and Jimmy, who had been fond of Linda, made excuses for him—why should she be so intolerant? Perhaps it was that until this last year she had lived

far off the track of happenings such as that which wrecked Linda's life, and it had an exaggerated effect on her. She had known of them, of course, but only from newspapers and novels; coming near to one had startled her, and thrown it out of proportion. Jimmy had remarked that Dick was not the only man who had bolted with a woman . . . and if Cherry Ripe was common she was very pretty. She had not liked her that day in Bedford Square, but she had realised her attraction, and the impulsive element in her character that had sent her to Linda and later to Linda's friend. She understood now why Dick had not gone back to Linda; he knew that Linda wouldn't have let him make love to her again—there were some things which were impossible, and that was one of them. She might have gone on loving him—she did; and if she had only been angry with him she might have lived, but she had been starved, because it was impossible that she could ever be anything to him again. He had not loved her enough to be faithful; and she could not live without him, nor share him with another woman . . . why did he go to the farm? And why did seeing him the other day paralyse her? She didn't want to think of him—she tried not; but she couldn't get away from him. . . . She went through all the rooms again. She felt that they were waiting too—the drawing-room with its fresh chintzes and masses of flowers, the pile of books she had brought down, and the music on the open piano . . . if only Dick would not come into her thoughts. . . .

It was late afternoon, she had been a week at the cottage. It struck her suddenly that she would go and look at the iron gates which the children would enter if they came to Beechwood. She stole out of the house, just as she had in the dark last winter; but now it was in the mellow light of summer—across the green and past the pond and the clump of trees and on till she came to the Beechwood wall. On the side-walk by the road there was fresh fine gravel, it crunched under her thin shoes. She sat down before she came to the gates on one of the wayfarer seats, and thought again of that

unexpected meeting in Whitehall: she was always going over it. She wished she had not seen him. And the strange thing was that every now and then her heart lingered over it with something that was like secret joy. His step and bearing were so alert . . . he had such bright eyes and a wonderful face. She didn't wonder that Linda had loved him, and it was impossible to think that he had meant to be wicked or cruel; it was not fair to judge him as one judged other people. She turned and put her arms on the back of the seat and rested her face on them—there was no one to be seen up or down the lonely road, and it was good to think of him. . . .

Then suddenly from behind the wall, a little way off but distinctly in the garden, she heard a child's voice, calling, "Janet—Janet, I want you——"

She started to her feet, a cry escaped her lips.

"They have come—they are here!" she stood irresolute, wondering whether to go in at the gates and ask if she might see them, or to wait—always there was waiting: but how could she—how could she!

"They have come! They have come!" She laughed for sheer joy. She clasped her hands on her breast and listened—listened. There was not a sound. But she had heard—quite plainly—she had heard Sturdie call to Janet.

She hesitated, then turned and fled swiftly along the road again—hurrying to the cottage. She carried her joy into it, her brimming-over happiness, the vanishing of all her fears, the underlying dread that had seized her at intervals lest Lady Hester should take them away to the other end of the world.

The children had come! They were at Beechwood, only a little way off, to-morrow she would see them. They had come—they had come! . . . then she gave herself up to outward influences—to the greenness of the trees and the scent of the flowers, the softness of the air. She thought of the orchard, and the chicken-run, the fat white hens would be going to roost in an hour's time, the children would be asleep at Beechwood. . . . And peace took hold of her, a sense—a promise—a certainty of happiness to come.

Half the night she lay awake thinking, and yet not thinking so much as blissfully feeling the air steal in upon her, while the dark sky without looked down—it was looking down on the children at Beechwood; here and there fitfully the stars came out, as if they too would see the little faces with closed eyes peacefully sleeping. She saw the dawn rise, and the trees that had been watching for it grow distinct—they knew, and the drowsy flowers knew, the whole world knew! oh! the infinite relief, the blessedness of it—her full heart could hardly carry its own happiness.

She wondered now that she had not had courage to go up to the house and ask for them, but she had never entered it, never been inside the gates, and though she liked Lady Gilston she was a little afraid of her: she was cold, and would have smiled all down her thin aquiline nose, and Sir James would have been fussy, and the children might have been tired after their journey and going to bed. It was better to wait.

The early morning post came, it brought a letter from Jimmy; he had heard the night before, too late to telegraph, that the “whole lot of them, including Linda’s children, had come back from Paris and gone on to Wavercombe.” Burdett, too, brought in a message from Mrs. Webb that she thought Miss Fingal would like to know that Sir James and Lady Gilston had arrived at Beechwood. There was no mistake. They had come! She wondered what she could do next, whether she could go and ask if she might see them, and how early that would be possible.

XI.

THE difficulty was solved by Lady Gilston, who walked in an hour after breakfast.

"I was at the Post Office and heard you were here," she explained. "I hope you don't mind so early a visitor."

"Oh no—no, I am glad—I have wanted to see you so much."

The visitor looked at her with surprise; this was a more animated young woman than the one she remembered. "What a charming room this is," she said.

"It is all ready," Miss Fingal answered inconsequently.

"Ready?" The visitor was a little puzzled. "Oh yes, you have come for the rest of the summer, and I hear you came in your own car."

"Yes, in the car." She could hardly speak coherently.

"I hope you have quite got over your horrid accident?"

"Oh yes——"

"I was so sorry not to see you in London. I sent Lord Stockton to explain why I had to go away so suddenly."

"He came and told me—you had to go, because of Linda's children." She was longing to get to them—to mention them.

"I knew you were interested, and would like to hear about them."

"I am longing to hear"—breathlessly.

"Lady Hester knows how kind you were to Linda——"

"Oh, it was nothing. Do tell me about the children." She tried to hide her impatience, but her voice betrayed it.

Lady Gilston wondered vaguely what had happened to Miss Fingal; she was eager and almost emotional about two children she had known very slightly. And she was altogether more attractive than on the wintry day when she had sat dumbly facing her visitor; the poise of her head and that way of doing her hair suited her; she had soft eyes and beautiful lashes. Lady Gilston was sensitive to right effects. The simple morning frock was well made, and the room, which had been Linda's, was just the same, no inferior taste had spoilt it. Really Miss Fingal was a pleasant surprise, a vast improvement on her uncle. Dorothy and Winifred would like her and it would be easy to send them to the cottage. Probably she would be very good to Linda's children, which would be a great relief. "You know, of course, that their grandmother carried them off to Mentone: she went there, I am afraid chiefly to be near Monte Carlo. She was very unfortunate; luckily there was a Mr. Lindlay, an Argentine millionaire, who persuaded her to go away from the place. He followed her to Paris and she married him. Then it turned out that he had three children of his own—he had said nothing about them and she had never dreamt of asking—naturally he objected to step-grandchildren. She was in despair; so she telegraphed to us. The result is that she has gone to the Argentine with him and Linda's children are thrown entirely on our hands."

Miss Fingal's heart was beating. "But you would not have liked them to go with her—you might never have seen them again."

"Well—I tried to argue with him but he was a firm man. I dislike firm men," Lady Gilston said with a hard sweet smile, "and he would have nothing to do with them—he wouldn't even settle money on them, and Hester had lost all hers—and theirs too. I sent for my husband, and in the midst of it there came the threat of complications in Eastern Europe with the Austrian affair. People seemed to think it might be serious, so he

thought it better to go to Lausanne at once and fetch back our two girls, who were at school there, and Mr. Lindlay made it an excuse to hurry his new wife off to South America and left the children with me."

"Was she very unhappy at parting with them?"

"No, I don't think so. She was infatuated with him. I believe it happens sometimes on the bridge between middle age and old age—some one said that to me in Paris—grandchildren made her look and feel old, and of course they were a great responsibility. Unfortunately there was no one to take them but ourselves."

"But you will love them—you knew their mother so well."

"Oh yes, poor little things; but really I didn't want to start a nursery again, my two girls have grown up. Dorothy will come out next year, and my husband has just been asked to stand for a seat that is likely to be vacant shortly. I am afraid I feel the children an anxiety, as he does—and of course a great expense——"

Miss Fingal sprang forward: "Give them to me," she said.

"Give them to you!"

"Yes—to me—give them to me," Miss Fingal repeated. It was an entreaty—a wild entreaty.

"But I don't understand——"

"I have no one belonging to me—I would give the world to have them——" she held out her hands, her eyes were shining. "This is what it all means——"

"What—what means?"

"Oh, I can't explain—I have been possessed by them—waiting—dreading lest they should go away out of sight——"

"But, my dear Miss Fingal!"

"Their mother would trust me. Let me have them. Let them be *my* children——"

"But isn't this just a sudden impulse?"

She shook her head. "I've been waiting for them, I have indeed—longing for them—thinking of them day and night—getting ready—won't you give them to me? Won't you let me have them?"

"I think, first, I must speak to my husband——"

"Tell him all I say—that there is nothing—nothing I would not do for them."

"It would be a great thing for the children, and this is such a charming cottage—they might be a comfort to you——"

"They would be life—the world to me—when will you tell me? Oh, dear Lady Gilston, I can't wait any more, I long for them so."

"It's too wonderful of you. Won't you come and see us this afternoon? We shall have talked it over by then, and you will have had time to realise whether it is not, as I say, a generous impulse."

"Yes, I will come, but it is no impulse—it is what I have been living for——"

Lady Gilston looked at her wonder-struck. "I think it is too beautiful of you," she said.

"Oh! no——"

"It's the sort of thing Linda might have done. But I will go back and we will talk it over with him. He says you are a very generous woman: I heard about the cottages at Leesbury——"

"Oh! the cottages!" impatiently, "because I did not let those poor old things get wet in the rain and shiver in the cold through the winter—I have only saved myself from feeling wicked and unkind. But these children would give me such happiness, such joy." Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes filled with tears.

Lady Gilston felt that she must hurry back and tell her husband of this surprising and really providential proposal: for she felt it to be one. "I will expect you soon after four: we shall both be there then." She looked into Miss Fingal's eyes once more and thought that she could almost love this strange woman.

"She is a most extraordinary creature," she told Sir James; "I am certain she would be good to them, and it would be a godsend if she took them off our hands."

"I wonder you didn't consent at once."

"I felt that you ought to be consulted, James, that it was due to you." She always gave people their due.

"You have been most kind and generous to my relations. Hester was a drag on you for years——"

"Oh no—and now she has married well. I am delighted, my dear Augusta, if I have been of use to her and given you any satisfaction. I feel that if Miss Fingal takes the children off your hands it will be an immense relief to you, especially with Dorothy coming out next season." He considered for a moment. "The only thing against it is that she has seemed a little—well, a little coming on with Jimmy lately. I should be sorry if it interfered with that possibility."

Lady Gilston smiled, the clear-cut smile that always seemed to Sir James to be one of the marks of her high breeding—he was proud of it. "I don't think it will," she answered.

"We had a very pleasant party at the Carlton just before I went over to Paris. I noticed that she always looked pleased when he talked to her, and she called him Jimmy freely—quite freely. And he is taking life seriously at last. He has paid his debts and is working; I've reason to believe that he is really working."

"I'm glad to hear it." She took up some coloured embroidery. "But don't be afraid that if Miss Fingal adopts the children it will interfere with his matrimonial prospects: frankly, James, I don't think she is likely to fall in love with him any more than Linda did—she was very fond of him, but she didn't want to marry him." There was a little note of superiority in her tone, and Sir James knew it: he knew that she was thinking that Jimmy was a nice boy, but he was not "one of us." Lady Gilston felt that Miss Fingal was, and wouldn't marry Jimmy. People made all manner of marriages, but unless money drove them to it there were still those who held aloof. Money had driven her to marry Sir James; she was glad of it, she had bought peace and comfort; and affection as well as gratitude had grown up in her heart. But with Miss Fingal it was different.

Oh, the exquisite hours of that day, . . . she wove all her dreams into them. They were filled with anticipation, for the children would be hers, she knew it; they

would come to the cottage, to Linda's cottage—their mother's home. They would patter up and down the stairs and along the floors of the happy rooms; she would hear their little voices in the morning, through the open window when they were in the garden; they would run beside the flower-beds, over the lawn, and play under the acacia-tree. She would get heaps of toys for them, and ponies—of course they must have ponies, and go-carts—they should have everything in this wide and happy world, if Lady Gilston and Sir James said that she might have them. To-day—this very day—they would be hers—hers! . . . She would take them along the flagged path—the very stones would know the tread of their little feet—one on either side of her, holding their hands—little hands that would curl up like soft sensitive shells in hers. . . . When they saw the orchard, and the fat white hens strutting about under the apple-trees, they would give cries of delight—she could hear them; they would pick up the windfalls, and very white pebbles, and tufts of seeded grass, and pink-tipped daisies, and bits of clover, and all manner of things that children loved, and bring them to the summer-house that Webb had made—how clever it was of Webb to have made a rough table and fasten it down in front of the seat so that it could not be thrown over. The children would put all their treasures on it. "Oh! my dears, my dears! you shall be so happy!" And then Miss Fingal—the Miss Fingal that had been—pulled herself together and looked round, and wondered how she divined all this, but there were things that all children did; one knew about them instinctively. She considered how she would go to Beechwood, whether she would go in the car—but she shook her head; Linda had not had one—she would walk there just as Linda used. Every step of the way would be like going towards a shining city that held her heart's desire. . . . She wondered how early she could go? Lady Gilston had said after four; she would get there at a quarter-past. She would walk slowly and sit on one of the wayfarer seats if she were too soon—perhaps she would hear their voices again. . . . And then she would enter the high gates; they would be standing

open, ready for the car—she had seen them open once, last winter when a cart was entering—she would walk up the avenue and then . . .

The afternoon came at last. It was time to put on her hat. In the glass she saw her eyes full of expectancy, her usually pale face flushed with excitement, and she held out her hands. . . . Oh, dear Heaven! she was half afraid. . . . She went once more to the rooms beyond the passage—they were ready—ready—waiting—she had carried flowers to them only an hour ago—then downstairs and out of the cottage, the white gate closed with a click, and she had started on the wonderful way—every footstep was a promise, a joy. . . . When she reached the wall she sat down on the bench, but no sounds came from the garden; it didn't matter, they were probably resting, perhaps they were being made ready to see her. . . . And then some nervousness took possession of her and her feet lagged as she went the last bit, through the iron gates, and along the avenue. She looked up at the high beeches and elms and prayed, "Let me have them," for surely the trees here were her friends too? She rang the bell at the important entrance, her voice trembled as she asked for Lady Gilston.

A long cool pleasant room, with many flowering plants, and comfortable sofas, and books, and evidences of being lived in by people of Lady Gilston's type, rather than Sir James's, and Lady Gilston herself sitting near a tea-table, the inevitable tea-table, with a very bright high silver kettle on it, and near it another table loaded with cakes: it went through her that it was a little sideshow of the sort that Jimmy loved.

Lady Gilston came forward with—"There you are. And first you will have some tea? I am so glad to see you . . . my husband will be here directly—it is the Sessions Day, and he had to go."

She sat down and looked out of the three wide open French windows facing her. There was a terrace, then some flower-beds and a lawn—a beautiful lawn that stretched to some high trees and a wood at the back.

"I want you to see my girls," Lady Gilston said, "but they have gone to the Tower House this after-

noon. Lady Francis is getting up a bazaar, and they have promised to help all they can. You must come and see them some other day, or let them go to you."

"I should like to see them," she managed to say.

Luckily when Sir James entered he came straight to the point.

"My dear Miss Fingal—I'm delighted to see you. Lady Gilston has told me of your very remarkable offer. I really don't know what to say. . . . Yes, my dear, some tea, not too strong. . . . You heard of Lady Hester's marriage? The three step-children were a most unexpected blow, but nothing is more unexpected than some marriages. I feel that it was quite natural he shouldn't want Linda's two, who were, of course, nothing to him." He hastily took a cake.

"Oh yes, it was quite natural." She had to say something.

"So they were dumped down on us," he laughed. "Lady Hester is a clever woman—very charming, but Mr. Lindlay was absolutely firm about the children."

"Let *me* have them," she could no longer control her eagerness.

"But on thinking it over are you quite sure?"

"I am quite sure—I would live for them."

"You are the most generous woman I know. I was saying so to Bendish yesterday. I saw him just before we came here. He had been at Leesbury seeing to the cottages with the doctor—Dr. Wynne."

"Oh yes,"—she was so tired of hearing about the cottages. "But the children——"

"Well, my own feeling is that it is impossible to refuse such a splendid offer; but they are my wife's relations, it must be as she says. Do I understand that you will provide for them altogether?"

"Yes, I will provide for them altogether. They shall have everything I possess."

He smiled and stroked his nose benevolently. "I think you must settle it between you." He looked at his wife.

"May I have them? Will you trust me?"

Lady Gilston went a step towards her. "I think

their mother would love to give them to you." She took Miss Fingal's hands in hers, and, almost tenderly, kissed her.

"When may I—?" The voice was husky, the grey eyes filled with tears.

"To-morrow—is that too soon?"

"Oh no. Everything is ready—I should like to have them now——"

"They shall go to you early in the morning with all their little packages. Would you like to see them?"

"May I?" her heart stood still.

"They went to see the cows milked. They will be here in ten minutes." Sir James looked at the wood beyond the lawn.

A dazed expression came to her eyes. "Let me go and meet them," she said, as if she were seeing something far off. "Tell me the way."

"We'll take you." They took her on to the terrace and half-way across the lawn.

She stopped suddenly. "Let me go alone," she entreated. "You are very very kind, but I should like to see them first without any one——"

They looked at her as if they knew. "Go through to the wood," they said: "at the end there is a gate, a little path and a field, they will come that way from the cow-shed——"

She hurried away like a dream-woman.

They came in sight when she had passed the trees; they were nearly across the field. She stood still and watched them—the red-haired Scotch nurse with Bridget, who had tight hold of her hand, walking with little steps beside her, and on the other side was Sturdie. He had grown—his green sweater was shabby and too small for him, his little soft cap was pushed back—she could see his eyes and the gold of his hair. The sunshine fell on them. Janet lifted Bridget in her arms and began to sing softly—

"Wha'll buy my caller herrin'?
They're bonnie fish and halesome farin';
Buy my caller herrin',
New-drawn frae the Forth."

Then all things fell away. She was by a mullioned window, her arms reached over the ledge, she heard the sound of a little drum. . . . For one moment, for just one moment—and never again—she understood.

They saw her. Janet put Bridget down, they ran to her and were not shy or afraid. She fell on her knees, her arms went round them: and infinite rest and joy took hold of her.

"You are mine," she said. "You are mine—I have been waiting—waiting all this time."

The children looked at her—a long searching look, then drew closer and were content.

"It was just as if they knew you, when they saw you coming," Janet said: the light through her ruffled red-gold hair made it look like a halo.

They were back in the drawing-room, the children on either side of her, and Janet a little way apart, waiting to see what would happen next.

Miss Fingal was bewildered, hypnotised by what had befallen her. "They shall be happy," she said. "I will live my life for them. And won't you let me take them back now?" she pleaded. "I feel as if I couldn't—couldn't wait till to-morrow."

"But they will want their tea." Lady Gilston had passed through the emotional stage and was her clear-headed self again.

"Let me take them to the cottage, we will have it together there."

They could see her trembling lips. It was impossible to refuse her anything. "You shall do what you like," they said.

"But it will take half an hour to get the car round," Sir James explained. "They can't walk. Their perambulator hasn't arrived yet. If you can wait till the morning——"

"They can walk quite well, Sir James," Janet put in; "Sturdie is famous on his feet—and Bridget can do a little bit, and for the rest, I'll carry her. It's not above half a mile."

Miss Fingal looked at her gratefully, then turned to

him. "You are very kind," she said gently, "but I don't think I could sit still in a car, and as Janet says we can manage. I shall never forget the goodness you have both shown me, but I cannot bear to wait any longer. I should——"

They let her go: they took her to the gates and watched her start, Sturdie with his hand in hers and little Bridget with Janet.

"I can hardly believe it is true," she said when she had looked at them asleep in their little white beds; "I can hardly believe that they are here."

"But they are," Janet answered with her pleasant Scotch accent, "and I believe I thought it would happen. I have been waiting all along for something. . . . And the rooms are just as Mrs. Alliston would have done them herself," she said as she went round, soft footed so as not to wake them, putting away their things, for they had been sent already from Beechwood: a last touch to that most blessed day, Aline felt it, another proof of its reality.

She heard them in the early morning, for all the cottage windows were open day and night, chattering in their beds. It was like the chirping of birds, she thought, as she turned her face outwards to hear them more plainly. Presently when they were dressed they went to the garden for a little run before breakfast. She spoke to them from the dressing-room window, just as she had imagined she would. Sturdie looked up and called to her, "There's a cobweb in the rose-bush, and Janet saw the spider hide himself." And Bridget hesitated as if making up her mind whether she would be friendly.

"When are you coming?" Sturdie asked.

"I am coming now, my darlings," Aline answered; "we will all have breakfast together out of doors, under the lovely tree."

She wondered if it could be her own self who went down the little staircase, and put to them, feeling as if the object of her life had been accomplished.

And so the day passed and the next and the next.

She took them out in the car once or twice, along the yellow roads, beside the dark fir woods, but it was greater pleasure to her than to them, for they liked the garden better, with the flowers, and the lawn to play on, and the cool shady orchard, with the green little apples above their heads to look up at, and all the white hens that clucked and strutted away from them, to run after. But everything was still like a dream to her, or like a happy part in a play that she was acting.

Mr. Randall called on the third day. She was almost glad to see him; it made her feel that everything was true. She talked to him with her mind full of the two little figures sitting on the grass, looking at the picture-book—she had bought it at the post office; but he thought how agreeable she was, and how interested in his parish news. She heard about the recreation-room, and the bazaar Lady Francis was getting up for the end of August. People had, most of them, arrived already from London and were arranging pleasant country diversions, he hoped the poor people too would profit by them. He rolled his words along his tongue and looked at her. She gave him a cheque towards expenses for something, she could not remember for what; but it didn't matter, and she smiled at him, so that he felt he had paid a welcome visit and been appreciated.

When he had gone she sat and listened to the children again, to their voices and the happy noises in the garden.

And Lady Gilston sent the two schoolgirls from Lausanne to see their new neighbour. They were nice shy commonplace things. The elder one had only just put up her hair and the other one still had a pigtail. They sat and looked at her, for the old Miss Fingal manner asserted itself, so that they were all very silent. Luckily the children came in from their walk and made a diversion. They too were shy, but the whole atmosphere was restful and full of dormant happiness, and Aline Fingal said to herself: "If only life might always be like this—but there is more to come, and it will be different."

Through all these days Dick Alliston was insistently

pushing his way back into her thoughts—day and night always Dick Alliston—and with him came a haunting sense that he ought to know about the children, where they were and that they were happy. After all they were his children as well as Linda's, and though he had proved that he was not a desirable guardian he probably thought of them and cared for them, and would like to hear that they were in their mother's cottage. She said all this to Bertha, who came to Beechwood for a week-end.

Bertha had seen and heard nothing of him since her return from the country cousins and Normandy. "But I should leave him alone," she remarked. "Time and silence generally settle things with a good deal of wisdom. If one day he finds out and writes to you, I should go up and see him—I don't think he would come here." She felt for the everlasting cigarette-case. "It's a queer thing that you should have longed for them so much—perhaps Linda wanted you to have them—it may have been the message she tried to send you, but it was too late—she may have taken it to you."

"A fugitive along the dark road from the farm. . . . I should have known——"

"There are so many things in us we don't know till something drags them out," Bertha said and struck a match, looked at its flame and then remembered why she wanted it.

XII.

DICK ALLISTON was obsessed with the idea of going to Eastern Europe. If a war out there resulted from the murder of the Archduke Francis Ferdinand—for even then, in late July, few people thought it would stretch westwards—he wanted to be in it. The work he had to do now was too easy, he had seen it through; there was nothing, as he told one of his colleagues, on which to exercise much intelligence, and probably some bigger fool than himself who would be glad to get it. He had not much money left; but he cared nothing for luxury or even for comfort, and he wanted to see and hear more of the world than was possible from a Whitehall window and the gossip of the men about him. He was a drifter on the open sea of chance and possibilities, as he had been since the day when the divorce court had stripped him of obligations. He had made over most of what remained of his moderate fortune for the benefit of Linda and the children, but so carelessly that little of it was left; it had gone to pay Lady Hester's debts; but of this he was not aware. The children had been given to Linda, and he had no power over them while she lived. He had discovered that Linda's death in a sense restored his right to them, but he was not in a position to claim it, and he imagined them to be safe with their grandmother, of whose vagaries he knew little, and watched over to some extent by Lady Gilston, for whom he had not much liking but considerable respect. His affection for them was not very strong; at their age he considered children belonged to women: he had to wait his turn. Meanwhile his feeling in general was one of bafflement and disappointment though his temperament carried him easily,

even gaily, through what to other men must have been disheartening. Ambition in the usual sense he had none, desire for reputation did not occur to him; but he had capacity and energy and nerve, and as yet he had done nothing that gave him, as he put it, a right to the world's shelter and light and share of all it had to give.

It was this point of view that he had, not without a sense of amusement, discussed with Jimmy Gilston; who had promptly called it rot, and been sufficiently impressed to pass it on to Miss Fingal. Alliston liked Jimmy, but he had regarded him, till lately, as a hopeless loafer, who cared nothing about abstract things, so long as he had enough money or credit, and sufficient ease. "Dear old Jimmy, you would refuse to get up to be made Archbishop of Canterbury, if you had comfortable rooms, a ten-pound note, and a jar of tobacco," he thought. But Alliston did care: there was that to be said for him, and if he had little to show, he had thought out questions, wrestled with problems that were insoluble, and attempted flight in many directions, though nothing gave him any satisfaction to remember save his invention: another man had the credit and the profit of it, but that did not matter, the thing was done, set going and of use. He had written arresting articles, but their effect had vanished with the day after their appearance. He cursed himself occasionally for the time he had spent in a world that amused itself to no profitable end, and consoled himself by thinking that after all people had to be amused, and human nature had its interest in the byways as well as the highways.

He left the office at five, a sultry afternoon; he might have done so sooner but a man had been anxious to go back to a sick wife: he dismissed him and insisted on taking over his work. There were large headlines to the evening papers, big letters on the placards the newsboys held in front of them, exaggerating the probable outcome of the political situation: an excitement to adventurous spirits and blasé loungers at clubs. "It will all fizzle out as usual," he thought as he went down Victoria Street to the Army and Navy Stores, "but I'll get a new kit-bag and, if there is a row, go and help the

little fellow." The little fellow was Servia—it had not yet changed its consonant. "I must see the children before I get there if I can manage it," he thought, as he ran down the steps of the stores and hurried towards Victoria. . . . He was nearly there when he found himself face to face with Cissie Repton.

"Dickie!" she said with a little gulp, "why, Dickie darling, how are you? I was thinking of you only just now."

"It's very kind of you. Are you all right?" he made a little movement onwards.

"You mustn't go yet, I want to speak to you. Come back with me."

"I have no time," he said firmly: firm good-humour was the right line with Cherry Ripe.

"But look here, it's not two minutes to the flat—my new one, you have not seen it yet, it is just here. Come on and don't be silly, Dickie. I want to ask you about the children and Miss Fingal."

He was arrested at that and she saw it.

"What do you know about Miss Fingal, and do you mean my children?" he asked.

"Of course I do, it isn't likely I should care for any other." They walked on together.

She was looking her best and knew it. The soft grey of her dress suited her, it was not for nothing that Lord Stockton had told her that she was like a Greuze; the grey hat had a blue knot on one side, the little bag she carried was of grey suède, her shoes were grey. The sun was kind to the gold of her hair and the blue of her eyes, she was a little flushed and her lips were very red. She looked like a bacchante who had stolen the best attire of a Quakeress. She was growing a little plump, too; he noticed it in the outline of her figure, the creamy whiteness of her throat and the under reach of her chin. She let herself into the flat, and led the way to her sitting-room. It looked just as when Lord Stockton had paid his memorable visit; the same masses of flowers, tall palms, a singing canary in the window, muslin curtains and sun-blinds to soften the light: an inviting alluring room, and Cherry Ripe knew it.

"Will you have some tea, or a cocktail, dear?" she asked. "I know a new one."

"Neither."

She sat down in the easy-chair, took off her hat, threw it to a corner, and fluffed out her hair with her hands, white hands that were not well shaped.

"Have a cigarette?" she took up a box from the little table beside her and held it out.

"No," he said quickly, "nothing. What do you know about Miss Fingal?" He couldn't bring himself to mention the children.

"Not much, but I was so surprised to hear that you had let her have them, I shouldn't have thought she was your sort."

"When did you see her? What do you mean?"

"We'll come to that in a minute. Don't be so sharp with me." She held out her hand: he looked at it a little disdainfully and drew back.

"Dickie," she said with a sudden break in her voice, "if you are unkind to me I shall break down and cry." She pulled a lace handkerchief from a fold in her dress and put it to her eyes.

He knew she was acting—she was; but she felt the part. "Don't cry," he said.

"I'm a precious fool, but I'm so glad to see you. Aren't you glad to see me? You've been awfully unkind, you know."

"Nonsense!" He got up and strode to the other end of the room, looked at a little statuette and strode back again.

"But you are," she said, "very unkind. What have I done?"

"You are the flesh and the devil, and I'm bound to resist you," he answered impatiently with a little angry laugh.

"You needn't unless you like——"

"What do you know about Miss Fingal?"

"Why did you let her have the children?"

"Let her have the children! *My* children! What do you mean?" He stopped abruptly in front of her.

"She has got them."

"How do you know?"

"Aubrey Wynne told me the other day." She was getting frightened.

"How did she get them?"

"I don't know, Dickie. Do sit down and don't walk about like a tiger in a cage."

"They were with their grandmother."

"Were they?" she said in a helpless tone that softened his anger. "I only know that Miss Fingal's got them, and I didn't think that she was your sort," she repeated.

"How did she get them?"

"I don't know."

"How did Aubrey Wynne know?"

"His brother told him; his brother is looking after some cottages Miss Fingal is doing up at Leesbury, and some old lawyer-man called Bendish is helping: that's how Aubrey got at it." She looked up. "He's an awfully nice man is Aubrey's brother."

"Aubrey's brother? When did you see him?"

"I saw him the day Miss Fingal was smashed up in the train: he asked me to bring up word——"

"My God! What were you doing at Leesbury?"

"It's an awfully nice place for a spin, Dickie darling." She had betrayed herself and tried to cover it: "I know Miss Fingal, I went to see her the other day."

"Were the children there then?"

"No, I suppose they hadn't arrived, but she's got them now. I couldn't think why you should let her have them."

"The whole business is extraordinary," he said. "I shall sift it, I shall find out. How often have you seen Miss Fingal?"

She was beginning to tremble a little.

"Do come and sit down and be calm," she said.

"How often have you seen Miss Fingal?" he persisted.

"I don't know, Dickie."

"How often, I say?"

"Well, let me see—twice."

"The other day you went to see her—do you mean in Bedford Square?"

"Yes, in Bedford Square, rather a nice old house. Fancy living there all alone, she won't know how to enjoy herself. I should like a house like that, so much more respectable than this,—I don't know how it is—we always overdo it somehow."

"And the other time you saw her—was it before the train smash or after it?"

"After it."

"When she was being carried into the hotel?"

"Yes——"

"Then what did you go there for? Don't lie to me, Cherry Ripe, I shall find out. Recollect I know you, through and through." He said it without anger but with a curious thrill that had its effect upon her.

"I went to see a friend."

"What friend? Where?"

"I went to see Linda at Highbrook Farm," she said in a low defiant voice.

He had stood still before her waiting for her answer; he turned away abruptly when he heard it, walked a few paces, then clutching at a high cabinet, rested his forehead on his arm. "You—you—went to see her?" He lifted his head after a minute and went back to her. "You dared——"

"I didn't mean to be unkind, Dickie dear." She trembled with fright.

"Will you be truthful for once?" he asked in a low constrained voice, "and tell me what it all means?" He almost groped his way towards a chair near her, and sat down.

"I suppose I'd better——"

"I heard that some strange woman went to see her," he said, "the landlady told me, but it never occurred to me by any possibility that it could be you."

"Well, it was," she answered: the defiance had gone from her manner, she was a natural human being hating to see how much he was hurt. "I'd seen her once before——"

"Where?"

"The day the case was heard—the look of her—her voice—went through me like a knife. I wouldn't have

done it if I'd known. You didn't even tell me you were married till we'd gone on a goodish bit together, and no one else did."

"Every one knew."

"People in your world know people in mine, but they don't talk about their wives, they think they are something apart—and that we are."

"Go on."

"When I saw her face that day I hated myself, I thought I had been a beast. I wouldn't have done it if I'd known, and I told her so."

"You told her so?"

She nodded. "It was off at that time—between you and me, I mean. I can't think why you didn't go back to her. You didn't stay with me and it was no use making two of us miserable."

"Two! What do you mean?"

"She was fond of you and you left her for me. I got fond of you and you left me, and there were lots of others besides me."

"They amounted to nothing. No one was anything to me but that one woman—ever!"

She looked up startled. "Oh! Come, Dickie, you did care for me once, or you are a born liar!"

"I told you just now that you were the flesh and the devil—I was carried away by you."

"You were just the world to me!" she made a little movement with her hands that was pathetic.

"And so it made a devilish trinity," he said scoffingly.

"Cissie, I implore you to tell me about your visit to my wife, what she said and what you did?"

"It was like this." She answered in a low voice that had sweetness in it, and he was sensible of it. "I've played the fool with heaps of men, gone the whole way with them—I'm just speaking truth for once, Dickie dear, I swear I am—but I haven't cared for any of them except the first of all, and he left me, and I wanted to die. You men don't know what you cost us girls, if we care. . . . I took it out of those who came after, for I found I could—I just loved to see them hurt. Then you came and I got caught. Do you remember

when we went to Fontainebleau, all that time I would have loved to lie down under your feet and let you walk on me, if it would have done you any good—every minute of it, I was like a hungry woman getting food, I wouldn't have changed places, not with an angel in heaven, or queen of any place on earth. And you saw it and began to tire—you never wanted a woman after you'd got her. You got careless, and the more I did things for you the less you cared. . . . I was a cursed fool! And then the divorce was coming along. It was I who let her know—I mean after you and I were back—I wrote letters to her relations, telling them about our trip. I wanted you to marry me——”

“Marry you!”

“Lots of them do; and I was making heaps of money, and smart people invited me—women, I mean—thought me good enough to know. But directly she knew, you took on and made a fuss. I suppose you'd thought she would never find out——”

“Marry you!” he repeated under his breath.

“And you dropped me after we came back. I'd a world of trouble to make you come near me, and when you did you made it plain enough you hadn't wanted to. Then I heard she was very ill—I got at everything through Aubrey Wynne—and after a bit that she wasn't likely to live. She told his brother at Leesbury that she wanted to live because of the children, for there wasn't any one to take them except her mother, who didn't want them, and Lady Gilston; but she didn't want her to have them. Then I got a mad idea that if she'd let me have them it would be all right—and I'd get you back!”

“Let you have them! Great Heaven!”

“I've made such a lot of money, Dickie, you don't know. That stockbroker you once saw me with, that man Evans, put it into rubber—and I thought if I could get the children I would do everything on earth for them. I knew you hadn't much money left, and I thought if I went there she would see I wasn't as black as I was painted. I was raving mad to get the children—I thought it would wipe out everything, and I could

start again, and I wanted you,—it's no good, I was a fool about you, a raving fool. But it all seemed to work out till I got there. When I saw her I just hated myself. It was no good of course, and I asked her to forgive me."

There was a long pause.

"And then you saw Miss Fingal?"

"I was in the car and she was carried into the hotel on a shutter or something as I passed by. I stopped and asked what it was all about, and saw Dr. Wynne and took up a message to Miss Fingal's house. And the other day I thought I would go up and see if she was better, and somehow we got talking about the children, and I told her I wanted them. But she seemed to think—just as Linda had done. I know it was a mad thing all round to go to both of them—but the moment I think of a thing I am always in such a hurry to do it, feel as if I must somehow, or I'll miss a wonderful chance—everything is a chance, you know, and you can't tell how it will turn out beforehand."

"*You* have the children!" He was too bitter and amazed to be angry.

"Well, why shouldn't I?"

He turned to her with a movement that made her voice falter.

"I'd put everything I've got on them, and we might go away to the other side of the world and start with a clean slate."

He shook his head.

"Do you want to marry *her*?—the Fingal, I mean?"

"I've only seen her for one minute in my life."

"I don't see that she has any business with them at all. She is nothing to you and you are nothing to her."

He got up abruptly. "I must go."

"Why must you—why do you treat me like this? I'm sick of it. I'm flesh and blood, and what else I am, men like you have made me. The children would be salvation to me, and you needn't think I'm not good enough to marry. Teddy Stockton wanted to marry me the other day!"

"Stockton did!"

"And he's got a place in the country and a title, and lots of things that you haven't. I was good enough for him, why shouldn't I be good enough for you, and you would have me in your power for——"

"Why didn't you take Stockton?"

"Didn't want him."

"You would have had his title and his place in the country," he snorted.

"Well, what good would they do me? I went down and stayed with his mother and sister—he made them have me——"

"Good Lord! . . . Did you like it?"

"I was never so dull in my life; you don't catch me walking into that web, I should have got used to it in six months—and run off."

He got up. "I dare say you would," in a tired voice.

"Look! You can't leave me like this?" She rose from the chair and stood with her back to the fireplace, afraid to move a step towards him.

He walked across the room and back again. "What we did has brought on a Day of Judgment for us both," he said, "but it was she who suffered, and was crucified for our sin: though what I did to you, and what you did to me, was only done on an accursed impulse. Perhaps the devil saw his chance and snatched at us both. Nothing can undo it, that's the tragedy of many things besides this: repentance, reparation and the rest, may give us some sort of satisfaction, but they don't bring the dead to life or put back the clock. . . . As for you, you were amusing yourself and I wasn't the first or the last, but just one of a series. You think you cared——"

"I did, I do!" in a husky whisper.

"It makes it better for you but worse for me."

She held out her hands. "Oh, Dickie darling—you don't know——"

He strode away and then back again. "We mustn't see each other any more, do you hear? There are limits to all endurance."

The tears fell slowly and hopelessly down her face; he looked at them curiously, thinking that they made

her attractive and were not disfiguring as tears usually were to women. And her beauty and the passion in her voice touched the lower side of him; he hated himself for it, but it was so. She seemed so helpless, too, in her distress. He went a step towards her—and turned away. "It's no good," he said.

"What are you going to do?—tell me that, Dickie."

"Do?"

"I feel somehow as if I should never see you again."

He hesitated before he answered.

"I shall settle up about the children, there isn't likely to be any trouble about that—and go out to Servia, if there is a row, and do my best to stop a promiscuous bullet. And you—I don't see why you shouldn't marry Stockton, it might amuse you. He's not a bad chap."

"I won't! I should hate it."

"You are quite right, but—" he considered a moment, and then broke out abruptly, "you must look after your own future, and—I'm not a religionist, as you know, but it pays best to do the right thing, the fair and square thing; the penalties of the others come home to roost. That's how hell is contrived, do you understand? It's pretty infamous what I have done"—he added to himself rather than to her. "You say you've plenty of money, is it properly invested?"

"Oh yes, it's all settled till I die," she answered hopelessly.

"And you can always get a turn if you want it? I wish you would get some other work, something that would be better than singing to fools and loafers who try to kill time till the devil is ready for them—I can't think what you live here for—" he looked round contemptuously, "what's the good of it? I couldn't breathe in a place like this."

"I often feel that I don't want it and don't like it," but she wished he had been impressed by it; it had cost her such heaps she thought.

He was silent for a minute. "There's nothing else to say; think of me as little as you can, and when the

day comes on which you curse me, do it as gently as you know how."

She went towards him then, in a second her arms were round his neck. "Oh, Dickie, don't go, don't go! I can't bear it!" She covered his shoulder with kisses.

"I must, my dear, I must. It's no good." He kissed her eyes and her fluffy hair; it was very soft and scented. "Don't let's prolong it—or make it worse," he said gently. His voice gave her some comfort and his arms were round her. He carried her to the sofa and in a second he had gone.

"O God!" she sobbed, "give him back to me! I haven't prayed for so long—I don't want anything else—but give him back to me! I want nothing else in the world—only you, Dickie——"

She was silent, and lay very still for a minute, then raised her head and looked round the room. "It's all over," she said—"I can feel it now, I can feel it as I never did before. It's over!"

XIII.

HE felt almost incoherent as he walked along Victoria Street and crossed to Grosvenor Place. Cherry Ripe breaking in upon Linda in the little sitting-room at the farm! Only the other day he had been there and looked at everything it held, and out at the Dutch garden, and thought of her dear eyes resting on it all. She had never known how he cursed himself for his folly, any more than she had understood how impossible he had found the limitations of the life with which she had been content—his longing for a larger share in the great activities. . . . He had committed his crowning act of folly and paid the penalty; but to hear that Cherry Ripe had gone to her—gone to his Linda—Great God! He had brought that on her. She must have known that he had nothing to do with it. He wished he had asked more questions, for more details, but he had been too much astounded; and nothing could undo it. He had said so just now: it tortured him to realise it.

As for Cherry Ripe herself, he reproached himself little on her account. He had not made her worse than he found her. If it had not been he at that particular time it would have been some one else who might have treated her worse. Her passion just now affected him little beyond the fact that a man always hates to see a woman distressed and in tears, and if she is a pretty woman with whom he remembers days that were, if not happy, at least full of joyous excitement, tears naturally touch him. And he knew that her feeling for him was chiefly the outcome of her wounded vanity: she had worried him with letters, and with meetings she had tried to make him believe were accidental; but he was

not violently angry with her—he knew the reckless impulses that carried her away and, while they had her in hand, how incapable she was of measuring their absurdity or their effect on others. They had their fascination—as most impulses have for good or ill—she had the beauty of youth to cover them, audacity and a temperament that was never very sensual—it was saved from that by the sentiment and sense of humour that were a part of it; they combined to give her courage, to make anything seem possible if she happened to desire it, and she struggled for it without consideration of any point of view but the one that had seized her.

“Poor Cherry Ripe!” he said to himself, and shuddered at her doings and the redness she put on her pretty lips.

The life she led had been thrust upon her, and she let it amuse her. Sometimes when memories of old days broke upon her she hated herself, had a cynical miserable hour—and recovered. She had been swept into various sets in London, among people who wanted something new and if possible a little startling, but neither stupid nor ugly. From being a success she had become a fashion, and her popularity reached far. She had sprung from simple country stock, but she was quick-witted and adapted herself sufficiently to the people among whom she found herself to make her a possible guest at houses where guests of any sort were welcome provided they were amusing and not in want of money. Young men with scanty brains and usually—not always—full pockets imagined themselves in love with her; they crowded the stalls every night to see her and were surprised and chastened at the insolence with which she treated them when they bored her, which was as soon as they became abject. She drew large audiences and salaries to match. She had, though she did not know it, an eye for colour and line; it helped her to dress not only expensively, but with picturesque effect, so that her clothes were often described in journals that thought it worth while to devote space to such things. All this had engendered an idea that if she chose to exert her power over people she could do what

she liked with them, and convinced her that her own particular point of view was the one that mattered, her desire the one to be gained, and that would be gained if she struggled for it. Dick Alliston had won her by slighting her, by treating her with her own weapons of insolence and indifference, till suddenly in Paris, reckless and impulsive as she was, he had allowed himself to be drawn into her net. He realised his folly before he ceased to be amused by it, and left her to continue the life of which her adventure with him was only a chapter. It had embittered her; she had been treated as she usually treated others, her rôle had been taken from her. She could not bear to lose him before she had grown tired of him, and desired to get him back, to love or hate, or serve or flout, as the mood dictated, made her desperate.

He pulled up abruptly. He had thought of the children. "Why should Miss Fingal have them?" he said aloud. A boy passing said: "Hullo! What's the matter?" He shook his head and quickened his pace. He remembered the face he had seen in that first moment coming out of the post office. What had she to do with his children? And why did seeing her have such a queer effect upon him? Something in her eyes—Heaven knew why, and Heaven kept its secrets—had made him think of a wax figure lying in a glass case in a church in Normandy—of a long straight road and two people whirling on in a car between the rows of poplar-trees. How happy they were! But why was he reminded of it by seeing Jimmy and the Fingal young woman in the car? . . . She had looked so young. He had imagined her much older when Jimmy had mentioned her before. She had looked cold, all but the eyes, and so immaculate. Why should she have the children? Why had the children been contended for by these two women? above all, how could Cherry Ripe be insane enough to imagine that she could get them, and that Linda of all people in the world would consent to it—Great God in heaven! . . . But this Miss Fingal? Why had she got the children? There had been a happening somewhere of which he knew nothing.

Suddenly he thought of Bertha. She might know

something. It would be impossible to speak of Cherry Ripe to her; he could not control himself sufficiently even in imagination to do that; she had been abroad with Jimmy at the time of the visit to the farm, and only arrived back just before the end. It distracted him to think of it. But she might know something about the children. He would go and see her. Bertha was a woman he liked, so sensible and calm and with a sense of humour, and her eternal cigarette soothed him and suggested a companionship that was not tiresomely feminine. He would go to her flat—better telephone first perhaps. She might be out. . . . There was Jimmy? He might try him? but no, he wanted Bertha. . . . She would understand.

He rang her up from a call-office in Piccadilly. She had just come back from Beechwood. Beechwood! then—she would know. In a quarter of an hour he had reached the top landing and was ringing at the door of her flat. He had spent some good hours in the room she liked to call her studio; it was large, and the atmosphere felt clean; he stood on the threshold for a moment to breathe it in. Big basket-chairs and a wide settee, matting and rugs on the floor, some unframed drawings on one side of the wall, a two-row bookshelf running along the other, a gate-table with more books, an easel and other properties, a high fireplace with hobs and a copper kettle on one of them, though of course there was no fire, a top-light with a dark blind drawn over it, an open window, with a step and a way out, to leads, showed a view of roofs and tree-tops that, passing mist-covered buildings, wandered to miles away: with it all an air of comfort and peace and utter quiet. Bertha was waiting for him.

"What a sensible woman you are," he said, "your place is worth living in."

"That's why I'm here," she answered. "Sit down—is there any news?"

"Russia is threatening to move if Austria takes itself across the Servian frontier—and Germany is said to be mobilising, but it mayn't be true——"

"Does it mean anything?"

"Probably not. A row is bound to come some day, but they bark and lie down again so often that one gets tired of expecting it." He went up to the table and turned over the books. "You read better stuff than Jimmy does."

She laughed. "He says he is working."

"I met him with a woman the other day—funny combination, Jimmy and a woman in a motor-car."

"Miss Fingal."

He snorted as he sat down. "I know." He felt as if Miss Fingal were intruding upon him at every turn; but he had come to speak about her, though for a moment he shirked it.

"He and she are pals," Bertha said and laughed again. There was a pause. She filled it in by pushing a box of cigarettes towards him. He shook his head and got up as if to go to the window, but stopped in front of her.

"Why on earth should she have my children?" he asked.

"It's better than letting Cherry Ripe have them."

"There's no question of that." He frowned and turned away.

"She wants them."

"Who?"

"Cherry Ripe—she went to see Linda."

He made an impatient movement. "I know . . ." There was a little break in his voice, but he held himself well in hand; "don't let's speak of that."

Bertha always understood. She smoked calmly for a moment before she said, "Suppose we talk of Miss Fingal?"

"If you like. I must see her again, then I shall know whether to let the children remain, or to take them from her."

"You have no power over them."

"I have!" he flashed out. "They were given to Linda, but she has gone; I let them stay with their grandmother, but she gave them up to the Gilstons, though they had no right over them—and Miss Fingal has none."

"She loves them. She was obsessed by Linda, she seems to think that in some way the children belong to her."

"They belong to me. If I choose I can take them from her. Tell me about her, what she is like when you know her better?"

"She used to be very silent, a quiet little thing. When Jimmy first met her he thought her stupid, but she isn't. And she has developed. She has caught hold of some of the things Linda cared for—it's very curious. I have been with her a good deal these last days, and see it."

"A blend?"

"I don't understand."

He sat down and considered for a moment before he answered. "There are some people, of course, who think things out for themselves; but the majority are moulded by different influences—or the four winds of heaven freighted with the thoughts and dreams of people from all the ends of the earth—and it is just a fluke which they come up against."

"Dear mad hatter, what about our ancestors?"

"Oh, some of us of course are just a growth—rank or otherwise—from a whole bunch of them—but we can be successfully trained by a decent human gardener sometimes—no matter what or where we hail from. . . . I should like to get away to some high mountain-top or great plain that no man had trodden before, and breathe in the pure air—then come back and see how the stale thoughts that hungry people swallow and take to be their own, and the used-up life with which most of them have to shift, struck one."

"To go back to Miss Fingal, you had much better let her keep the children. What could you do with them? Linda was very fond of her——"

"But why should she have them?" he said per-versely. "Do you like her?"

"Yes, I am growing fond of her, so is Jimmy. But you saw her?"

"She made me feel as if I had arrived at the Day of Judgment, and I fled."

Bertha pulled out another cigarette. "She's not at all like an avenging angel."

"I heard a good deal about her at Leesbury—the old women mumbled with joy when they spoke of her the other day."

"I can't think why you went there—of all places."

"I wanted to," he answered shortly. "Tell me more about her. She has old Fingal's money, she liked Linda, and she has done up the Leesbury cottages—what else?"

"She's a dear thing."

"She looked precise and cold." All the time, though he tried not to show it, he was longing to hear more. In some strange irritating way Miss Fingal was attracting him.

"She does seem precise sometimes: she lived alone for years in a flat in Battersea. Uncle John, as she calls him, left her his money, but she hardly ever saw him, no one seems to have cared about her. But she isn't cold. I should have thought you knew too much about people to judge them by what they seem."

"Where is she now?"

"At Briarpatch with the children."

He got up and walked about. "And you have been seeing her there?"

She nodded. "She was wonderful—and very sweet with them—sitting under the acacia-tree or taking Bridget carefully down the orchard. She has made a flagged pathway to it and a new summer-house—and their rooms are charming. She is so like Linda in some of her ways with them. She might be their mother——"

"The two great founts of maternity—Eve and the Virgin Mary—have not run dry yet, and women hark back to them, if they have a fair chance. I must get hold of Miss Fingal. Perhaps I saw her on a bad day; or she thought me a scoundrel."

"I dare say she did—you are one," Bertha assured him pleasantly.

"Only outwardly."

"It's inconvenient in the long-run; so why be one, even outwardly?"

"I am always hurrying forward to see what will happen; I generally meet the devil on the way and stop to play with him."

"I am fond of you, Dick, but I never can make out what you are driving at."

"Neither can I." He resumed his stroll about the room. "That thing's all out of drawing." He stopped before a picture she had worked at a good deal. "It isn't like that—I know the village well, it's on the banks of the Rance, we went there once. . . . I remember every detail of every place we went to . . . What a hell-bound fool I've been!" he exclaimed.

"I did it from memory."

"Which is always fatal: you put in detail you think ought to be there, or might be there—but it isn't."

"Why were you a hell-bound fool, Dick?" she asked, not in the least disturbed by his criticism.

"It's my appetite for more, and more than life is able to give me—or any other human being, perhaps, that has been my curse, the key to all my crimes. . . . The world is such a wonderful place, so magnificent, and most of us, all of us, are so inadequate: I have always felt there must be a clue—a way to something better or worse, different anyhow from anything I have come across—that would let me into some secret that belonged to it, and as if any human being I met by chance might know it. I have tried them all, all that were possible that is," he laughed oddly, "got drunk with men, made love to women, prayed in cathedrals, gambled in hells—nothing could hold me long," he pulled up before her. . . . "Think of the magnificent world with its summers and winters, storms and thunders, its every variation of strange life and doing, and in the midst of it all, men and women mostly taken up with a comedy or a tragedy, in which himself or herself is the chief player, and no reason in particular why it should begin or leave off."

"I'm very sorry, but I don't understand you a bit."

"It doesn't matter, no one does, least of all myself. But it has always seemed so impossible that what men saw and knew could be all there was to know concern-

ing the world and that astonishing growth called a human being——”

“I wish you’d sit down while you talk. You are rather like a wild beast in a cage.”

He remembered that Cherry Ripe had said this to him—it was astonishing how much women were alike in spite of their variations. Why shouldn’t he walk about?

“I like to move when I am thinking, movement is life.” He flung himself into a chair.

“That’s right,” she said. “But I don’t see that your curiosity accounts for some things you have done—nor how they are going to help you to solve a divine mystery.”

“Divine? What do mean by divine?”

“She gave a shrug. “People use the word to describe things they don’t understand. The world is a divine creation.”

“They use it as a symbol. The world is divine if you like—but its secret may be hidden by the devil in the heart of any prostitute; the key of a prison in which an angel stays or a genius is hidden may hang from the waist of any jailer. Why should a lash in the hand of some lusty brute injure an innocent man if the world is divine? I go on seeking—hungry—longing, but never finding any solution that proves its divinity, if you like that word.”

“But Linda?”

“A thing to love, a flower in a garden, living in the light and dying in the darkness, but no secret of the world in her keeping.”

“The saints,” she said lamely, as if she knew the absurdity of her words.

“Prayer and suffering and self-satisfaction, living in sanctity and dying smirky, convinced that heaven will be their reward—meritorious, no doubt, but was the world worth creating for them?”

“I think that perhaps great poets have the clue,” she said as if she had been considering the question, “great writers——”

He shook his head. “They have found no key—nothing strong enough to force the door behind which

all the mysteries are. It is the same with music. I often feel that it opens the gates, but only to close them again. It gives us high moods of religion or voluptuous emotion, longings to be up and doing something that is admirable and great—or not admirable and not great—but it is all transient, nothing that for ever lifts humanity to a high place worthy of the world."

She was puzzled, bewildered by his eagerness. "I don't know what you want, Dick. I think you are a lunatic. After all, people do their best."

He laughed out at that. "And many do their worst and one is pitted against the other. People go on pottering, each on his own, each for himself or those who nearly belong to him, but never with an overwhelming sense of the wondercraft, the beauty and splendour of the world; and never with one magnificent aim in view: the evolution of a humanity to match it."

"But what started all this turmoil in you?"

He shrugged his shoulders again. "I have always had a sense that there was some secret—some defect or bit of machinery gone wrong, to account for the depravity, the vice that humanity suffers and knows, and our inclination towards it and our weakness: the legends give no explanation or enlightenment—the bafflement one meets is maddening." He went to the window. "The splendour of the world," he said, and looked towards the sunset and the deepening mists of the distance. "The music and colour of things with which man has nothing to do, the saturation with life and growth—growth and movement and change. The secret must lie that way, for every thing has it save death—and death itself has it in a fashion, since no man lies still for ever: even in corruption there is movement."

"Well, never mind, dear, you and I have not arrived at that yet; and the world is pleasant if you know how to use it—human beings have their good times as well as bad."

"Oh yes—but unless there is some goal, some aim for them, why were they created? There's been a colossal upset somewhere."

"I shouldn't wonder. But as we can't set it right,

why worry? The most we can do is perhaps to add a grain of sand to the delectable shore before we set sail for eternity—”

He looked up quickly. “Bertha! that’s not one of your sentiments. Who said it?”

She laughed—her peaceful comforting laugh he had often thought it. “Some imp or angel inside me, I think. It took the reins for a moment. . . . Things get said that way sometimes.” She felt for another cigarette. “And now I want to talk about Aline Fingal and your babes.”

“Is her name Aline? I rather like it. The children? My dear Bertha, you won’t believe it perhaps, but I love the little kids.” He stood facing her, she saw his very bright eyes, and the smile on his face was suddenly a happy boyish one. “I long to see Sturdie again—my little son! I have never seen Bridget; I wanted a girl too: it’s bad luck. Why should they—my children—go to Miss Fingal? They are mine—I want them.”

“What would you do with them?”

He turned away abruptly, his face became suddenly careworn. “I don’t know—that’s it; I don’t know. I saw a late edition as I turned your corner—things look threatening. If there’s a war anywhere I shall have a look in, if it’s only as a special correspondent; I could go as that, I know.”

“And what would become of them meanwhile?”

He was silent for a moment or two. “You are damnably sensible, Bertha: upon my soul I don’t know; but I can’t have them hauled about from pillar to post—first their grandmother, then the Gilstons, and now Miss Fingal.”

“Why don’t you go and see her?”

“She’s at the cottage—but somehow I couldn’t go there.”

“She’ll come up to London if you ask her—to the sedate house in Bedford Square, and interview you. It would be rather interesting. I should like to be there to hear.”

He was standing before the picture again. “It’s all wrong, too imaginative.” Then with a jerk towards her,

"Look here, I must think it out. But I want the children; they have an excellent nurse, they would be all right with me—you could have a look in on them occasionally. It must be one or the other," after another moment's thought, "the children or the war."

"Toss up!"

He forced a laugh, went to the window and took a last look out at the distance. A minute later he was on his way to the Reform Club.

There were late telegrams. He stopped in the hall to read them. "They seem to mean it," he said to a man standing by him, and he thought—

"I must write to Miss Fingal." Then the interview with Cherry Ripe flung itself across his brain, her preposterous visits to Linda and Miss Fingal and her insane idea that she might have the children. Bertha knew all about that; but she was a nice woman and never made one feel embarrassed; that was why she had not talked about it. . . . All the evening Linda's face haunted him, he could see her eyes and feel the touch of her soft fingers on his arm . . . "but this stranger woman, why has she come into it? I must write to her."

Aline Fingal sat in the garden through the long twilight. It had been a good day, as all the days and nights had been since the children came, for even her sleep was laden with consciousness of them, and when she awoke, it was only to smile and drowsily close her eyes again. Janet and Burdett and the rest all knew how content she was, though she said little, for some happiness is most complete in silence, and the sense of it is like a secret caress. . . . The trees grew dim and the night sounds came. "If I may keep them!" she thought; "Dick—Dick, let me keep them! She has given me her love for them—she left it to me—let me keep them." And the haunting thought came: "But he must love them too, his own children—and if he wants them? . . ."

XIV.

AFTER all he put off writing to her. It was too difficult. He remembered her face when he said that he had been to Leesbury: and since then he had heard of Cherry Ripe's visit. She probably thought him a cold-blooded monster: so he waited. Early in the week, when the German reservists at Antwerp were recalled and the German railway stations were given over to the military, he felt certain that England would be drawn in. He had travelled a good deal in Germany and knew its ambitions. Then Austria declared war on Serbia, and he gave himself up, as he expressed it, to the four winds of heaven, ready to go before the one that blew in the right direction the moment it was high enough. "But I must arrange something about the children," he thought. Germany, of course, had virtually closed in when the first ultimatum was sent to Russia. "It's coming!" he said, and late that night—Friday night, the 31st of July—he wrote to Miss Fingal.

Lady Gilston walked over to Briarpatch the next morning. The cottage had a curious attraction for her. She was immensely grateful to its new owner. The children had been a terrible embarrassment when the Argentine gentleman thrust them on her. It meant starting a nursery again; besides, though she had been sorry for Linda, she had disliked Dick Alliston. And she had only just got over the divorce business, which had worried her less than she had feared it would do, for Sir James, while he lamented it, found an underlying satisfaction at being able to tell his acquaintance "that poor Mrs. Alliston and her mother, Lady Hester, are relations of ours." "Thank God he is still vulgar!" his wife had

sighed with almost affectionate gratitude. Linda's illness had been a drag on her time and sympathies, and for years she had been apologetic to him for Lady Hester's pecuniary indiscretions; even the Alliston money, imprudently trusted to her, had been lost at the tables of Nice and Monte Carlo. Altogether she felt something like despair—despair that was angry rather than painful—when she found herself travelling from Paris to Beechwood with the children thrown indefinitely on her hands. It gave her a sense of unfairness, for it had come just when her own two had left school and she wanted to devote herself to them. She was a tired woman whose life had been full of annoyances concealed and grappled with in silence. She exaggerated the difficulties of this last one: it was a load not to be borne. All at once that summer morning at the cottage Miss Fingal had lifted it. It seemed wonderful. She had been interested in "the lonely little thing" before, grateful to her for going to Leesbury, but from the day when the group went slowly out of the Italian gates—Miss Fingal and Sturdie, Janet and little Bridget—Lady Gilston's whole feeling for her changed, though at best her affections were of only moderate warmth and kept well in hand; expressions of them or demonstrations, she thought tiresome or absurd—except occasionally to one's most immediate belongings, and then they were unnecessary: there were some things so usual they needed no signs to prove their existence.

"We have quite a party already for the week-end," she said, "and one or two more will probably arrive this evening. We want you to come over to luncheon to-morrow. They will talk of nothing but the situation of course—no one thinks of anything else. Do you get a last night's paper in the morning?"

"No. Stimson heard in the village that Germany was going to war, but I feel so content, so far away from everything now. When I am more used to it," she added with a long-drawn sigh, "my thoughts will go out to the world again." Aline's eyes turned towards the garden.

"They are very fortunate children."

"Oh no, it is I who am fortunate." She was silent for a moment. "Last night I was thinking so much of their father. . . . He must long to see them—to hear of them—I am so afraid of his wanting them."

"I don't think you need trouble yourself about that, he is a selfish man; I never understood his attraction for Linda——"

The postman came as she was leaving. At the hall door he gave them some papers and a letter. Without meaning to see it the direction caught Lady Gilston's eye. She turned to go and hesitated.

With an instinct of what it meant Aline tore the letter open. "He has written!" she exclaimed, "Oh, do stay!" She read it aloud:—

"DEAR MISS FINGAL,—Will you kindly tell me when the pleasant visit of my children to you will terminate? I am anxious to make other arrangements for them; and if you are in London *soon* would you allow me to see you?—Yours very truly,

"RICHARD ALLISTON."

She looked up, her eyes flashed, her face was white. "Other arrangements—and he underlines *soon*. Do you think he wants to give them to—" she couldn't bring herself to say it. She added fiercely, "I will take them away to the other end of the world, rather than let her have them."

Lady Gilston had of course heard of Cherry Ripe's mad idea, but she was amazed to see this quiet woman suddenly blaze. "Why not go up and see him?" she said. "I should telegraph, you will find it easier than writing, to say that you will be in London on Monday and will see him the next day. Monday is Bank Holiday, but you won't mind that: if you go up in the afternoon the roads will be quieter." She was a practical woman and arranged things quickly.

"But the children? I feel as if they might be stolen if I left them. She might come——"

"She wouldn't do that. They will be quite safe with Janet and the rest—the Webbs are devoted to Sturdie.

Or why not telegraph to Bertha too, and ask her to come this afternoon and stay till you return? then you will be quite happy about them. You could bring her to luncheon to-morrow, she likes a political party."

"She may be away."

"No, we heard from her this morning. Don't worry yourself unnecessarily, dear Aline—if I may call you that, as Bertha and Jimmy do; I seem to know you too well now to be formal," Lady Gilston added as an apology for the tenderness of which she was half ashamed. She put out a hand: "Write the telegrams and let me take them."

Aline lifted the hand and rested her cheek on it for a moment. "I will—no one ever cared for me at all till this last year—it is so good."

Lady Gilston heard her voice at intervals all through the day. "That girl seems to belong to one," she thought, "or to the part of the world in which one likes best to live." It was significant that she thought of her as a girl: but happiness and a place in the world had done a great deal for Aline.

Bertha came, calmly radiant. She had meant to stay in London over the excitements, but the call of the cottage lured her away from them.

"Of course you must see Dick," she said, "my step-mother is a wise woman; and stay away as long as you like, for we shall be quite happy here—consider me the Canon in residence. And for Heaven's sake take Stimson with you, then you'll be comfortable. I am used to my garret disguised as a studio, and your retinue is afflicting—Janet and the maids will do for us."

This was said in the garden—she was dodging the gnats and midges with her cigarette. "You'll have to learn to smoke if you live in the country," she added, "but I don't see you doing it!"

They lunched at Beechwood again on Monday. The guests all knew that something was taking Aline up to London immediately afterwards, and they almost envied her, in spite of the uneasy feeling that quiet leisurely country visits away from all worries and noises might soon have a sudden ending: for it is strange how

dreamily communicative an atmosphere can be at times, and how often we hazily and very silently accept its knowledge.

Sir James was voluble and almost impatient; the calm enjoyments of wealth away from crowds were all very well, but he felt off duty.

"I don't think we ought any of us to be in the country at a crisis of this sort—" he said. "And if there is a war we shall all want to do what we can." It had occurred to him that there would be various posts to be reached by a generous expenditure, in which he might add to his reputation,—that he might even become famous—and official.

The car came to fetch Aline. Bertha was going to set her a mile on her way and walk back. The people they passed looked after them; the time was coming when every one would want to be in London. The air seemed charged. In the outskirts there were placards of late editions not usually published on Bank Holiday. People standing about in groups looked different, half silent, as if they had heard, but scoffed at the idea, that the older order of things would pass never to return—the young men in straw hats with a laughing expression on their faces that was a little unreal, the young women flaunting their finery defiantly, as if they knew that the day was coming near when they would shed it; the older people, graver, curious and doubtful; it seemed as if they all stood at the cross-roads between a strange exciting joke and a tragedy, wondering which way to look and what to believe: the old hesitated; the young went on, snatching joy while they might.

Dick Alliston had telegraphed that he would come to her at five o'clock on Tuesday—Tuesday, the 4th of August. She was glad in the morning that she had come up the day before. She would have disliked his seeing the house in a dust-sheeted desolate-looking condition. By the afternoon it wore its normal aspect.

He arrived punctually. She was sitting in the drawing-room on the sofa across the corner, from which

she could see the whole length of the double room, broken by an old thin Persian rug. There were flowers about, and some long boughs of greenery from Briar-patch. Stimson had seen to it, she wished he had not now; it seemed a little cruel—for they would remind him, but it was too late to take them away. She dreaded his coming; it was difficult to lay hold of the conflicting emotions that possessed her, to control them. There had been hours of late when she had thought of him almost tenderly, and others when she had made plans for avoiding him and taking the children for ever beyond his reach. Since his letter came she had been afraid lest it meant that he wanted them; it seemed to imply this: as she sat waiting for him, she felt as if everything pointed to it; even the ticking of the clock had a significance as it went towards the moment that would bring him.

It struck half-past five. Through the open window she could see the trees, thick and green, their patchy whitened stems and the summer-house in the corner. The roadway was empty, there was hardly any traffic, everything was unnaturally still, as if waiting for the midnight decision. Presently she heard a taxi coming round the square, her heart seemed to recognise it. It came nearer and stopped before the house. She kept time in her thoughts while he paid the fair, and through the pause while he stood on the steps before he was let in. She knew every stair he trod and the exact moment when Stimson hesitated outside, before he opened the door and announced him. He entered quickly with his head bent a little forward, and eager eyes that lighted on her in the first second, as if they had known where she would be sitting. He hurried towards her; he felt her hand tremble as it touched his.

"It is good of you to let me see you." He looked at her searchingly and then at the room. "I have been here before," he said. "I came with Bendish on some business in which he thought your uncle might be interested. But it is different—" His eyes rested on the pot of green boughs by the bookcase. She felt that he knew—and hated herself. "How does the garden

look this year?" His voice seemed to reach her from a distance.

"I think it is—beautiful." She could hardly speak.

With a little quick movement, as if to change the direction of his thoughts, he said: "I told you that I went to Leesbury." He sat down facing her but a few paces off. "I heard of your visits to Linda—that's why I asked you to let me come to see you that day I met you with Jimmy. You evidently thought me a scoundrel—" He gave a queer little laugh.

"No—but——"

"Linda and I were there half a dozen times."

"She told me."

"Once we stayed at the farm."

"I know."

"I went there last time." . . . He got up and walked away as if to avoid seeing her face.

"How could you!" She almost whispered it.

"I wanted to get into the surroundings that had been hers. Dreams are sometimes other people's thoughts that have travelled to us or lingered in the air—we breathe them in. Some thought of hers might have waited——"

"Yes?"

"I wanted a sign from her, no matter how much it hurt, besides it had become a shrine, a place to which to go and pray—not that I ever do pray." He looked at her, waiting for her to speak.

"It was dreadful that it should end so." She put her hand to her throat to steady her voice. "You couldn't have loved her very much!"

"I did," he came back to her. "I worshipped her with the best side of me, but the best side of one is not the whole, and the other is sometimes strong enough to—to send one's soul to hell."

He said it almost to himself, he seemed to forget her for a moment; and she hardly heard him for the beating of her heart, the strange whirl that beset her: was it joy or fear, or only the tension of his visit?

He was silent for a moment, then as if he remembered why he had come. "You have my children?"

She tightened her hands together. "Yes, I have the children," she answered under her breath.

"They are my children," he said firmly, as if he thought she would deny it, "and I want to make arrangements for them——"

"Oh no—no," came from her lips.

"If there is a war I shall go—I can't leave them at a loose end——"

"Oh, but you wouldn't—you wouldn't let any one—I can't say it," she cried passionately; unlocking her hands she held them out as if entreating.

"Don't let us shirk putting into words what we both know," he said. "Like an accursed fool I ran away with a woman—it was a madness but a brief one. I was a brute to Linda to do it—but it is over—it was very soon over. I have not been a brute to the other woman, for if I had not left her she would have left me. I lost the children by it—and the mother had them; but she has gone and I have done nothing since that would justify their not being given to me. They are mine—I can claim them and I want them, to have them with me, when it is possible. I understand the Gilstons have sent them on a visit to you——"

"Not on a visit. They gave them to me. I thought they had a right. They have their own. I am alone in the world—I had been waiting—I think Linda meant me to have them. She tried to send me a message but it was too late, she couldn't speak—I should have gone to her but I was lying insensible at the White Hart—perhaps she brought it and that is why I have thought of them—longed for them so——" Her voice was low; she felt incoherent with the excitement she desperately tried to quell.

He stood staring at her. Precise and cold he had called her; this woman was on fire, and young still, and passionate. "You were very fond of her?" he said.

"Yes—yes. She was like no one else, like nothing else in the world that ever came to me—she made me think and feel—she gave me more life to live with——"

"And the children—are they much to you?"

"So much that I think I shall die if you take them from me—yet I see that I have no right to them."

He sat down and looked at her. She had grown calm again. The sunlight, straying in, rested for a moment on a gold thread in her hair—hair twisted round her head as Linda used to twist hers. He saw her clear pleading eyes with the long lashes shading them, and her lips a little apart as if to let a sigh come through—he couldn't imagine any man daring to kiss them, she looked too pure and simple—and if she was not pretty there was something about her that drew him irresistibly to her: he felt that she was a woman to trust, that it was a great deal to know her—to be in her presence. "It is a blessed thing that you should care for them," he said, "they are far better with you than they would be with the Gilstons." The whole expression of her face changed. "If I go—I should like to think of them with you——"

"I may keep them!"

"Keep them till I come back and ask you for them. Probably I shall never come back——"

Her heart sank at those last words. "Oh, you will!" she said desperately.

"Give them a sense of the beauty of the world—and make them fit to live in it," he went on.

"I will—I will!" He felt it to be a promise.

"And ideals—give them ideals," he laughed again, a little harsh ironical laugh. "You won't believe that I have had them; but I have, all my life—and stayed in the mud at their feet. Ideals go wrong sometimes, but half the beauty of the world is their flowering. Do you remember what Chevrillon says—?"

She shook her head. She had never heard of Chevrillon.

"'Before ever there was a white marble temple shining on a hill it shone with a more brilliant beauty in the mind of some artist who designed it'—it's true. Ideals! we talk of them and generally go the other way, or strew the road before them with—God knows what!" He stopped for a moment, then he asked abruptly: "Why did you go to Leesbury? Did you know her before?"

"No. But at Briarpatch I heard of—of you both; it seemed to be full of memories. Perhaps some of the thoughts you left lingered for me." She looked up with a little smile, and he thought how quickly she could assimilate. "One day," she went on, "Lady Gilston told me about Leesbury, that it was a quiet place and I might go and see Linda if I went there. I liked Wavercombe but people called——"

He laughed, fresh laughter this time like a school-boy's. "I know; stuffed people who walk on their hind legs and think their tennis tournaments and garden parties the centre of the polite universe—" He stopped; he had been looking towards the further room. "I think I remember two tall white vases at the end there? Your uncle told me he had bought them at Pisa?"

"I sent them away—they were like ghosts in the twilight." She was rather ashamed of it now—but she had never associated them with Pisa; they had been so white and cold: she had imagined that anything concerned with Italy would suggest the summer and the sun, and orange-trees and olives.

"But ghosts from Tuscany," he said. "Lord! how I should like to see the bridge over the sleepy Arno again—and the queer shops that smelt musty inside. We must take the children there some day." A strange thing to say to her: he realised it and turned to her, his face happy with the vision he had conjured back for a moment. "*You* shall take them and I'll be your humble courier and watch-dog. When will you let me see them?"

"When you like. They are at Wavercombe; shall I send for them to-morrow?"

"No; and not yet. I will tell you when I feel I can—and dare. I have never seen the little one at all."

"She has wide-open eyes that seem to be asking a question that the rest of her does not know."

This quiet Miss Fingal said strange things sometimes, he thought. "Did Linda ever talk of me?" he asked, and winced: his thoughts seemed to smite him sometimes.

She nodded for answer.

"Did she forgive me?"

"I think she felt that she had nothing to forgive."

"Did she want me back?"

She shook her head. "She knew that was impossible. She couldn't have borne it after——"

"I knew," he said, "and I couldn't have gone—it was not as if she had been like any other woman." He stopped a minute and then his voice changed. "Any other women I have known and talked to are far back in my thoughts, if they come in them at all—like years ago—and easy to forget. I have tramped on, away from them but never away from her. . . . Since she died I have felt sometimes as if she stood beside me, watching, putting out her hand to touch my arm . . . but one feels that sort of thing at times. It is nothing."

He looked at a clock. "It is time I went. I wish you were in London; but the country is better for the children—and for you too, of course."

"I was always in London till last year—but now I get so tired of it."

"Not in this old square, with those worthy plane-trees looking in upon you, and this good Adams' room that is so comfortable? I should write immortal works if it were mine. What did you do with your life before you had Sturdie and Bridget?"

"Jimmy Gilston asked me that question," she said.

"He is an impostor," he laughed. "I have told him a dozen times that he ought to do something with his life. If he asks again, tell him that now you are starting two children on the way to be decent citizens and help the world in the future—no woman can do better work than that." He went half-way to the door and stopped. "It was awfully good of you to come up on purpose—when do you go back?"

"Not to-day——"

"Who could that has life inside him—or her? I am going to walk about till midnight, as thousands of others will, waiting to see if there is an answer to the ultimatum.—Strange to feel as if one's finger is on the pulse of the world, as we all do to-day?"

She looked up with a new excitement on her face. "I did not realise it quite like that," she said, "one lives like a snail in a shell sometimes."

"Oh no—it's not that. Probably we shall all be burning patriots this time to-morrow. We only find ourselves out when the springs are touched," and as he looked at her he thought that it was Linda who had done this to her—or was it the baby fingers of the children? "When will you come back to London for good?"

"I don't know, but I will bring them up when you ask me."

"That's agreed. May I come again—whether they are here or not?"

"I want you to come": eagerness rushed unbidden to her voice.

He looked at her, a long dispassionate look as if he were diving into her heart and soul; then held out his hand and turned headlong towards the door. He hesitated for a second when he had opened it. "Bless you!" he said, and went so quickly that she stood watching, and hardly realised when the sound of his footsteps had died away.

XV.

THAT evening and far into the night Aline Fingal sat by the open window in the drawing-room and lived the most wonderful hours she had ever known. . . . She had seen Dick Alliston, the words sang themselves to her like a *Te Deum*. "He has been—he has been." . . .

The world without awaited the stroke of the clock to change it for evermore, she was conscious of it all the time. . . . Dick Alliston had left the children with her, and she felt that he would never take them wholly away. . . . Every living soul in the square—in all the houses beyond, in every house and place in England, consciously or unconsciously—was waiting for the clock to strike the hour of midnight in Germany. . . . She had seen Dick Alliston and she understood how it was that Linda had loved him so much, she conjured back his voice to her ears, his face to her dreamy eyes. . . .

The people were thinking of their country and what would happen when midnight had come in Germany. . . . Dick Alliston had walked up and down the room behind her, it would never be empty or desolate again as it had been before he came. How strange that he remembered the vases from Tuscany—she wondered now why she had been afraid of them—he had stood looking at the place where they had been, he knew the land they had come from. . . . The people behind the lighted windows with the drawn-down blinds were sitting up waiting for the clock to strike. The square was very still, save when a hurrying car or taxi whirled round it, or people walking by, on the wide pavement beneath her, talked in hushed tones: they were wondering whether it would be peace or war. . . . She had seen Dick Alliston and she

understood why Cherry Ripe had loved him, he was like no one else in the world; it was not possible to think of him, of his voice, of the way he looked and the things he said, and not feel that of course she had loved him—every woman he had known must have loved him. . . .

The clock struck the three-quarters . . . in fifteen minutes England might be at war. She had never felt keenly about any other great event . . . but she had been outside the world; now she was a part of it, she belonged to England—and in an hour's time England might be at war . . . Dick would go and fight. If he were killed—she held her breath—but no, he was made to win, to come back a conqueror. She could imagine him a Crusader in the centuries of long ago, with sword and armour, his bright eyes looking through his visor, his voice ringing out on the battlefield. . . . He would go to the war and she would wait with the children, as the women and children of old had waited, and pray for news of him. . . . He had given her the children, they should be like him when he first grew up and set out on his way in the world. . . .

Linda died—alone at the farm; but they had been wonderful days in which he had loved her, worth paying for with all the pain that had come later, for he had been her lover. She had longed to live for the children, but her soul could not stay in its shelter, and set out alone—along the dark road—while her friend was lying insensible at the White Hart.

Dimly she remembered a night of agony and a dream of the children . . . perhaps it was the night that Linda had struggled to send the message. . . . It must be so wonderful to be loved as Linda had been loved. She remembered the two people standing together in the darkness by the pond at Wavercombe: she had heard the passion in the man's voice, she had known when his arms went round the woman. Nothing, nothing in the world could matter while they loved each other so much, any after misery was worth bearing to gain such an hour as that. . . .

Would the joy, the wonder, the heavenly magic of life never, never come to her? She had been lonely

all those years at Battersea, and all those months after uncle John's money had come to her. It was better now that she had Linda to remember and the children were with her and she had seen Dick; but she hungered for love. She had never done that before, except in the hour when, half fearing and not knowing, she had sat, an eavesdropper, on the seat; but she knew what she wanted now—she wanted to be loved, to feel her lover's arms round her. . . . She felt the rush as of meeting through her whole being, the beating of her heart. . . . She had seen Dick and understood how blessed Linda had been, even though she had suffered the torture of the rack afterwards,—it was worth it—worth it. . . .

Some of the windows were darkened—the people behind them wanted to imagine in a dream they conjured for themselves that all would be well; now and then she heard a street door open and softly close, and then footsteps that went away into the distance; . . . once, as two figures passed, she heard a voice say, "No, in Downing Street or outside the Foreign Office. They will proclaim it there. Or, how about Buckingham Palace?"

It was nearly time. . . . Then in the distance a clock struck. They knew! the people a mile off knew! That dark grey-blue sky above knew. They knew in all the wide places where the people had been waiting. Dick knew, she felt that he did—that he had waited; she could see him, the tilt of his head, the eager remembering look in his eyes—eyes that had for a moment seemed to see so far away into the great distances this afternoon when he spoke about ideals and a temple on a hill. . . .

Everything was unnaturally quiet, then—hark! . . . there was a cheer in the distance, it died away as if slowly strangled, a car rushed by, people returned, she heard their voices, hushed yet excited, "War! War!" they said, and hurried on as if to carry the news. "War," a man's voice said, so clearly that she heard him, "but the honour of the country is saved. . . ." Steps came nearer and stopped, she craned her head and looked out, some one went down the area steps. It must be Stimson, of course; he had been out to hear.

He came up a few minutes later. "I beg your pardon, miss," he said, "I think you would like to know? It's war with Germany."

"Where did you go?"

"Down to the Foreign Office first, then Parliament Street and Whitehall, there were crowds that stood as silent as possible, but they shouted when they knew—you should have heard them, miss."

"Were they glad?"

"They felt it had to be: they seemed proud of it—we all were, though war is a terrible thing of course. I saw Mr. Alliston——"

"Yes"—he wondered at the quick movement of her head, the tone of her voice. "What did he do?"

"He stood very still in one place with his eyes fixed, and waited—the moment he knew he gave out a cry, it was joyful like, then he turned and hurried away as hard as he could. Lots of people sang 'God save the King,' and went off to Buckingham Palace to cheer."

She went to bed after that. She felt that the Sistine Madonna over the mantelpiece would watch her all night long. Just as the clock struck two a boy shouted: "Special! War with Germany!"

She heard him drowsily, and thought that Dick would go to it. . . . At six in the morning the boys called out again "War with Germany!" She wanted to get up and do things that would help, for she was a part of England: every human being had become that in the night. "War with Germany." . . . And the children were sleeping peacefully at the cottage; and peace was in the garden, in thousands of gardens, and flowers were breathing their sweetness into the summer air, and here and there among the still trees birds were calling to each other, and the countryside was stirring itself, dogged and wondering, not knowing yet that never would England be the same again. It was all over: a great chapter had ended: another was beginning.

The early post brought a letter from Bertha. Sturdie had not been well and there was a rumour of fever in the village: "The Canon in residence feels a little nervous," she said. An hour later Aline was on her

way back: anxiety for the child blotted out all remembrance of yesterday, even of the war, though the underlying sense of it remained. It was afternoon when she arrived and Bertha was self-reproachful. "It is all nonsense," she said, "he is perfectly well, and it was a false scare in the village. I'm awfully sorry to have brought you back."

But Aline was glad. For some reason she would not let herself consider she felt that it was better to have come back, she was safer at the cottage—safer from what? . . . The children had been playing in the orchard, picking up windfalls from the apple-trees and looking for eggs in the hen-house; they heard the car arrive and ran to meet her, calling "Allee—Allee!"—the name they had given to her. They clung to her skirts; and she knelt on the grass, so that she might hold them closer. Their little arms went round her neck; she remembered their father's face and voice and knew now that he had loved their mother, that he loved her still. It sanctified everything, and if he went to the war—why, his going had not come yet; there would be days of blessed peace and knowledge to live through at the cottage: in her heart there was no room for fear or tragedy.

There was a happy tea-party in the garden. Bridget sat up to the table and fed herself daintily, and looked at the branches above her, as if wondering whether there were birds up there; and Sturdie chattered about the sunflowers, six feet high, that nodded to each other, from the farther bed, like stately ladies and gentlemen in a quadrille: Webb had told him that the hens would fatten on their seed in the winter. And a tall rose-tree had burst into bloom while she was away in London; she took it as a sign, for had not her own life opened out too? All the time Bertha sat watching, tucking up wisps of fair hair that worried her neck—she disliked caterpillars and wanted to make sure that one was not stealing round it—or fingering the cigarette-case dangling as usual at her side. It was strange, she thought, to see Aline there in Linda's place with Linda's children: and yet it looked oddly natural.

Then a telegram came from Dick. He had been to Bedford Square and found that she had gone. "I knew England would play up," it said. "Enlisted this morning, signed for active service. Writing to you." A choke came to Aline's throat at those last three words. In the morning there would be a letter from him.

"So like Dick to enlist! He ought to get a commission; he and Jimmy were both in the O.T.C. at Oxford. I suppose he wanted to find out what the life was like," Bertha said, and thoughtfully curled the smoke of her cigarette round her finger. "I wonder what you will do, Aline—but you have the children of course—that will help—we must all do something. I did some training four years ago and shall try to get out with the Red Cross."

The morning brought her two letters, one from Jimmy: "Just to tell you that I am a Tommy. No uniform for three weeks. Allowed to feed and lodge myself for the present, everything a scramble and difficult."

Bertha laughed. "Of course—he is a blend too, as Dick calls it," she said.

"A blend?" Aline said absently. She had Dick's letter in her hand.

But Bertha did not explain. "Father will be furious," she laughed. "He'll go up, you'll see, and clamour, and expect his son to be made a Field-Marshal."

XVI.

THE war was a month old. The retreat from Mons was over, the Germans were still advancing on Paris—only to be turned back in the next day or two. In England, Kitchener's Army was being raked together, and London squares, and even streets, were drilling-grounds. With desperate haste thousands of eager civilians, ill-matched, often shambling, and sometimes physically weak, were dumped down and fed under any roof or none, hurried into uniforms and turned into soldiers destined to help in saving their country and amaze the world by their courage and endurance and fighting qualities.

Aline was back in Bedford Square, the Gilstons in Portland Place. It was impossible to stay at Wavercombe, it had become a vast camp, a mass of canvas and hastily run-up shelters. Briarpatch was lent to an important officer. Beechwood was turned into the local Headquarters—Sir James was proud of it, he felt that it brought him into prominence with the military powers and gave him the excuse he desired for remaining in London. To the surprise of his family he was not angry with Jimmy for enlisting. It appealed to him, to the embers of youth that lingered in his own nature. "Thousands of young fellows who are gentlemen will do it—I should myself at his age. It shows that the right stuff is in him; but I should like my only son to have a commission. He is qualified, and he deserves it," he explained. Jimmy was amused and refused to worry. He was quite satisfied. He was allowed to remain in his own rooms, since accommodation for a whole army was not to be found in an hour—or even a month; he hated having to show up

at eight in the morning, he thought the new drill infernal till he realised the elasticity it gave him, and he was bored at being on duty most of the day. Still there were points: his sergeant evidently thought him an ass, but a superior sort of ass, especially after Sir James had been round, and he was free on Saturday afternoons. He told his father that he preferred being a private. "But I said it chiefly to annoy," he remarked to Aline, "for though, if one is misguided enough to have a father one must humour him sometimes, I shan't do it in this. I mean to remain as I am!" His hair was cut, his walk improved, he looked smarter than he had ever done in his life, and was rather pleased with himself in uniform. He wanted to be sent out as soon as possible, and he was—to Flanders. He had hoped that he might be within reach of Bertha, who was at Rouen working at a small hospital under the difficult conditions that prevailed in the early days of the war, but one could not have it all one's own way, he told himself, and he was fortunate to get out so soon. He had forty-eight hours' leave before he started, and went a long excursion with Aline and the children in the car to Epping Forest. He would have preferred it without "the kids," but again he told himself one couldn't have it all one's own way, and they were not so bad. He saw Dick Alliston, who was free in the evening, and explained that in order to do so he had refused to dine at Bedford Square and friendship could not go further, for Mrs. Turner was an excellent cook—to say nothing of the lady. Dick consoled him in a manner that he appreciated.

"I wonder what you thought of Aline Fingal," Jimmy said, for he had heard of Dick's visit. "Now that she is better dressed, has more to say, and knows her way about among people, she has grown younger and better looking. She is a little too motherly for my taste, since she took charge of your confounded kids; for she doesn't pay quite enough attention to me."

"I like it."

"They are your kids. But what do you think of her?"

He considered for a moment as if to make sure of himself. "She is the only woman, besides Linda, I ever felt that I could love."

"Deuce you did!" Jimmy answered uneasily, "but you have only seen her once—since that day she was with me."

"That's all—but one knows!"

Jimmy was silent for a moment, he had a struggle with himself before he answered. "There's no reason why you shouldn't marry her some day—if she would have you. Perhaps she would; women are precious fools."

Alliston shook his head. "I am not made for that sort of thing. I tried it once and failed. I couldn't settle down to the cooing domestic life—women can, they loiter in the gardens; but most men—I'm one of them—want the highroad, and if it's a rough one they are all the better for it."

"Women are coming out of their gardens."

"Oh yes—the gates are unlatched. They will lose a good deal; but there are compensations. Some of them won't stand it——"

"Some of 'em will—and do—very well."

"And the effect on the population will be seen in the next generation."

"I shouldn't wonder if it's a stronger one."

"Probably—what there is of it. The garden life will be over and only hardy shrubs will grow outside it." He turned to Jimmy with one of his wonderful smiles. "I love the gardens—though I can't stay in them—one turns into them for rest and happiness."

They walked together to the Embankment, then, as on the night he saw Aubrey Wynne, Dick went to Hungerford Bridge, which was still open, and stood looking down at the river, and at the great searchlight that was a new sensation. He felt unutterably lonely. Glad that he had joined, popular among his comrades though he was known as "a silent cove," and a good soldier. He had been spotted almost at once as a man who ought to be recommended for a commission. But he lived, at heart, on a great waste ground, knowing that he had distanced everything the years had given and wrung their

chances dry. The only one he could spy ahead, in his present mood, lay with the war. He was impatient to go out, to see the new phase and what would come of it, to help in what might be the salvation of humanity—the clue, the key of which he had dreamt. But first he wanted to see his children—and Aline.

She was always Aline in his thoughts. A correspondence had grown up between them—he did not know why, only that it had,—inquiries about the children, when she was coming to London, and so on; and her letters had become something to look forward to every other morning, for they grew to be as often as that. All the old eagerness was in him still; but she was a peaceful little backwater, a shelter for his thoughts: and the children were safe. He wished sometimes that she were a cleverer woman, since his son was in her hands, but she was good and sweet and pure, as that other one in his life had been, as he wanted Bridget to be—and for the rest, he could see to it later, and probably in any case the children would work out their own salvation—or the reverse, as he had worked out his.

He wondered about Cherry Ripe too sometimes. Casually one day he heard of the man who had first brought her to London and started her on her—adventurous—way. He was in the Army Service Corps, not thought much of, but a good-looking fellow. After all, Cherry Ripe had not had a bad time from her own point of view: she had known all sorts and conditions, rioted in luxury and extravagance, and enjoyed playing the devil with a score of young idiots, who were probably none the worse for it in the long-run, though they might be the poorer; and she had money and would certainly marry some day. He had an idea that the man in the Army Service Corps would go back to her in the end. Poor Cherry Ripe, there had been excuses for her. . . .

But it was of Aline Fingal of whom he thought most. Her letters gave him an atmosphere he had not known since the old happy days—and they were full of unconsciousness tenderness. "I must see the children," he thought, "but I wonder why the deuce it is that I

want to see her——” and obstinately he would not go near Bedford Square.

Two days later he ran against Stockton—in uniform. They stopped and looked at each other embarrassed; then, as if on second thoughts, shook hands, and each knew that the other remembered a day at Beechwood and Linda in a shady hat walking with them up and down the terrace. She and Dick had managed to escape to the wood beyond the lawn, and an hour later, flushed and happy, announced that they were engaged. Stockton went back to London that evening. They had met since, but a nod or a curt word or two had been all that passed between them. Now war had broken down the fences, they had liked each other in bygone years, and after a moment's silence they stood together on the same plane once more.

“How do you manage to be swaggering about in this get-up already?—not back from the front, are you?” Alliston asked, nodding to the red tabs.

“I am in the War Office.”

“Mending Kitchener's pens? I am told he uses quills.”

“He sent me out with a special message to Headquarters last week—I am not a fighting man, but he has uses for me——”

“It's a way they have in the army—well, come and lunch. I suppose you'll survive being seen with a Tommy?”

“Why didn't you apply for a commission?” Stockton asked when they were in the Carlton grill-room. They were both known there, and the waiter had tactfully put them at a corner table.

“Wanted to see what this game was like. But it takes it out of you. They were not so keen on Swedish antics last time I was drilled.”

“Why infantry?”

“Better chance of getting through with your share of the job quickly, whichever way it goes, and I shouldn't mind getting hurt.”

“I understand. It would be expiation.” He said it almost affectionately and with low-toned solemnity.

"Don't be an ass, old man. I'm out for nothing of the sort." I was nettled but recovered in a moment.

"I wish you were. I have often been anxious about you."

"I say, look here, Stockton. I shall give you a genial kicking if you don't look out, for the good of your soul and the mending of your manners."

"We are old friends and can speak frankly."

"Not on some subjects."

"All right, dear chap, we won't." His voice was very soft, he looked sorry. "I wanted to tell you, I thought it would interest you—that I understood what you did, for I came to know her."

"Came to know who?"

"Miss Repton."

"You old reprobate. Cherry Ripe and you! I heard of you."

"She calls herself Miss Repton now. She has dropped the other."

"Oh—and——"

"I asked her to marry me. She refused."

"Bad luck! She would have leavened you so advantageously."

"She told you about it, I know."

"Yes, she did, but I didn't want to give her away. I like you for speaking of it—you are nice people both of you. I hope she told you that our meeting, I mean when I went to her flat a little while ago, was an accident—there was no harm in it!"

"She told me everything: she has a singularly frank nature. You had a great effect on her that day, Alliston—it will count to you. She sold everything in the flat directly war was declared and gave up her work."

"All in a moment. Poor Cherry Ripe! It's so like her. She was always at the mercy of her impulses, and the devil generally suggested them. Where is she now?"

"Yesterday she started for France."

"France! What is she going to do there?"

"Canteen work. She will sing it to the men."

"Poor chaps! She'll play the devil among them. But it'll amuse them for a bit."

"I dare say. And at the present rate there'll be few of them left to remember. The casualty list was terrible this morning."

"So it won't matter: and she'll be useful, she has capacities and womanly ways. It's queer you should tell me all this, Teddy." Alliston went back to the old name without thinking.

Stockton acknowledged it by a graceful smile. "She gave me a message in case I came across you," he said. "Cellom told me that he met you in the Haymarket yesterday coming from St. James's Park, so I tried to run against you to-day at the same time."

"She sent me a message?"

"I was to tell you about her, to give you her love and say that she hadn't meant to be a bad lot, she couldn't help it; and she believed the children would have been her salvation; that was why—I am trying to repeat her exact words."

"I see. How did she manage to go to France?"

"Violet Horton has started a canteen and asked her to go. It's at Dieppe. The Duchess is going to it directly."

"Of course she is," Dick laughed, "and they will all be very kind and sympathetic and thoroughly enjoy themselves. It is a queer world, but perhaps the war will be good for it in the end."

"Something was necessary to straighten out things—the madness of London, the indecencies of the women's dress, the carnival of pleasure——"

"And the rest." Dick knew all this by heart. "Well, glad to have seen you again. The war has given as well as taken—sounds like one of your remarks, doesn't it?"

Stockton smiled again: somehow his smile always seemed to have the remembrance of a text in it. "Get your commission," he said: "you will be more useful to the men as an officer than—than as you are."

"Perhaps they won't want to give me one."

"I shall tell Kitchener about you."

"While you are mending his pens—I'm beastly rude!

Don't worry, old man, I'm not sure that I should like a commission, so I'd better stick it."

But he thought as he walked away that he felt out of it sometimes among the men he was with, though most of them were good chaps, splendid stuff; but he couldn't stand Virginian cigarettes or sentimental stories at picture palaces; and he hankered after regular baths—till he got to the trenches anyway. "I expect one is proud of one's dirt then, but the old environment sticks to one like a spider's web to a fly, even when it has broken away."

XVII.

ALLISTON had been six weeks in camp at Reading when he heard that he was going out with the next draft. He had his commission, though he had not sought it, and only accepted it after some hesitation. Perhaps Lord Stockton's remark, that he could be of more use as an officer than as a Tommy, decided him. It was certain that he made an excellent soldier: he had delighted in his early training and proved himself then—all that he was later. When something was said to him to that effect by his Colonel who, curiously, proved to be a cousin he had hardly known before, he answered with a careless laugh: "No credit to me. I like it and one is seldom a crass failure at anything if one cares enough—work needs a heart, and gains or suffers by it as much as a woman."

He was being sent out very soon after joining; but, as in Jimmy's case, some influence had been used—he knew where to go for it, and his eagerness and efficiency did the rest. Like Jimmy, too, he had only forty-eight hours' draft leave—barely that, but he was lucky to have it, some did not get any in those rushing days. He telegraphed to Aline asking if he might see her and the children on his last afternoon, and set about putting his affairs in order in case the Hun scored off him. The affairs were more important regarding the future than he had ever hinted, or thought much about in the present; for the changes and chances of the last year made it probable that if he lived, there would be (or if he didn't there would be ultimately for his son) advantages that most men value.

Jimmy was wounded already, badly, though he was

safe. Modern warfare was then a new game, and the proportion of casualties was much greater. A bit of shell had torn his left arm, reached his lung, and landed him in a Base hospital for some time before he could be moved to England. Besides this, his head had been "scratched," as he put it, and he was a pathetic but gratifying sight to Sir James, who managed (of course he did) to hurry over to France full of concern and fatherly pride. "My dear chap," he said, "you have served your King and country. Be satisfied: I am proud of you. But how did you do it?"

"The Hun attacked me in the flank and made a dent, but he didn't reach his objective. . . . When I am chucked over the water see they dump me in a London hospital."

Sir James promised and smiled, delighted with what he called the military way of putting things. It occurred to him that Jimmy wanted to be near Miss Fingal, and that with a head bandage as well as a bound-up arm she would feel he was a hero—and be touched.

Alliston told Aline he would go to Bedford Square at six, but it was a quarter past when he ran upstairs in front of Stimson and strode in. She made a little sound as she went forward, it betrayed that she had been waiting and watching.

"I have been kept," he said breathlessly and took her hands. The letters had broken down many barriers. "Things crowded up, you know——"

"Yes, I knew," she answered.

"I have longed very often to come—but I couldn't." He looked round as if he were making a note of everything the room held. "I shall think of you—you and those two——" he said and sat down by her, "here and at the cottage. I am glad the cottage is occupied—doing its bit."

"I wish I could do mine. Bertha is, all the women are, or planning——"

"So are you—there are bits indoors as well as out. The children are a big chunk. No one will be left out who wants to be raked in."

"I know." She looked at him and tried to feel heroic and failed; she was only conscious of two things—the joy of seeing him, the dread of his going. "Shall I get any letters?" she asked.

"I expect so—sometimes—you'll get a field-card anyhow. And I told them to send to you if—if I'm hit, or anything goes wrong." He saw the little movement that went through her and put his hand on hers for a minute.

"I hate to think you are going," she said simply, "but I should hate it more if you didn't want to go."

"Of course you would."

"Men do such strange things, such dreadful things—for women didn't make this war," she added with a pathetic smile.

"Probably they had a hand in it somewhere: they don't always put in an appearance but they are seldom left out."

He rose, but stood near her. "After all, the war may set the world right in the end. The fire of the guns may be the cleansing fire: that's the pious thing they are saying, and it may be true." He was looking down at her face. His eyes were full of light and tenderness. She answered back in her heart though she did not speak a word. "We are fighting for the right this time," he went on, "an ideal has pointed the way, and if one journeys on towards the east, no matter how dark or terrible the night, one meets the dawn——"

She looked back at him gratefully.

"I am going out to help, if I can; as every blessed Tommy with a brave heart and lifted arm is doing. . . . If the people at home play up it will be all right: any who don't—ought to be marooned on an island that isn't ours. But they will, you'll see—it's their chance—the Wonderful Chance that comes once in a lifetime in some form to every one of us—and the individual and the country are often a symbol of each other."

"Mr. Bendish said this morning there were going to be strikes."

"Oh no—" it seemed to hurt him.

"The strikers may be in the right?"

"Can't be. They ought to be taken to the lamp-posts——"

"But if the employers are in the wrong?" she persisted.

"Two wrongs won't make a right. Nothing will excuse the strikers. In war time the country comes first. They will see that and help; it's their wonderful chance—the country's wonderful chance! And every man in the Army thinks it unconsciously—or the enemy would win——" he stopped and asked: "Now, may I see them?"

They went up together side by side, slowly; Dick had her hand till they reached the landing—then she pointed to the door and went down.

He came back twenty minutes later, Sturdie beside him and Bridget in his arms. His face was beaming. He put Bridget on her lap and played with Sturdie, teaching him how to salute. "I have sent them some things," he said, "I ought to have brought them. What a duffer I am. Sturdie, you have a rocking-horse and a Teddy bear coming; and Bridget—something else. They have heaps, I know," he went on, turning to her, "but I wanted to give them some—you know?" He felt as if she knew everything.

Then Janet entered saying it was time for bed, it was nearly seven. He let them go in a lingering fashion; but he had a happy thought. "Look here," he said to Janet, "get them tucked up quickly and I'll come and have a last look at them. I should like to see how they look with their little heads on pillows."

Bridget put her arms round his neck and kissed him. His eyes followed them up the stairs till the door was closed, then he turned to Aline.

"Oh, you must have loved her!" she exclaimed.

"Of course I did," he answered. "I loved her only in the world."

She put out her hands appealingly as they sat down again and asked: "But wasn't love enough to hold you to her?"

"She was a flower in a garden: I always feel that

about her. But I was a wayfarer, tramping—curious and eager along the world's highway. She was content to stay in her shelter—and I went on alone; but always with one woman in my heart, locked in it—hidden——”

“And you couldn't go back to her?”

“I couldn't. There are powers that sometimes get the better of one——”

“But in the beginning, before they got hold of you?”

He shook his head. “I wasn't made to stay in the shelter, to live my life in it, any more than the lover of Christ and all the saints is made to spend his weekdays in church. He goes there on Sundays, but outside it and at other times there are things he wants to do; and an insatiable hunger, a madness was on me—I know all that it meant to Linda.” He got up and walked about again, struggling to speak calmly. “I found her and gathered her and left her to die; remembering her, loving her, haunted by her, but finding it impossible to go back, to stay beside her, content with all that had contented her. I felt as if irresistibly I was projected into space—urged onwards, taking the good and the evil just as it happened on the way.”

“She would have gone with you.”

He shook his head. “Not then. She was a beautiful thing and belonged to Nature, to all that was highest. Of highest love, passion should be born, the gods come of it then—if there are gods,” he added cynically. “But passion doesn't always go with the sort of love I gave her; it is seldom so strong that it masters other impulses—and the material side, that has no idealism, no sentiment even, riots through one's veins sometimes, carries one away, and the devil wins.”

“But you loved her through everything?” she asked again, as if at some desperate bidding.

“Yes; all the time,” he said. “Through a mad orgy, or wild adventure, in which one makes no sign of it, love for a holy thing may stay, and run through one's whole life. It's like the still river in a landscape that remains through all the changes near it—the ground on either side may be ruined, the builder set up hideous

erections which stand and disfigure it, or fall and encumber the meadows and woods on either side, but the river remains—hidden perhaps—but it is there—the storms sweep over it, but they never sweep it away—” He broke off. “This is my minor poet language,” he said with a harsh laugh, “I always apologise for it—but I expect the minor poet feels his stuff, poor chap, and I felt more about Linda, thought of her, loved her more than anything else in the world, and she knew it.” He stopped again. “In some way, for which I can’t account, I think she knows it still.”

She put out her hands again and drew them quickly back. The clock struck seven.

It reminded him. “Let us go and see the children.” She loved his tone of authority.

“They belong to us both now,” he said when they had come down again. “I have given them to you—and no one can take them away.”

They stood looking at each other for a moment by the fireplace. Then suddenly he remembered and exclaimed: “It’s time I went—I say!—it’s getting late, we start in three hours’ time—you will hear—” They were silent for a moment. Then—it seemed natural—he took her in his arms. “Good-bye, my dear,” he said, “I love you, you know I do—first woman and last woman to me—I don’t know why I say that—” she looked up at him for into her heart it carried happiness, “as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. . . . You know I love you?”

“Yes, yes—I know it—feel it—and it’s such joy to be here,” she answered, “to be rested at last and comforted——”

“Comforted?” The word seemed out of place.

“Yes—comforted—it is like coming out of the clouds and mist—or rising from deep waters into the light—” she seemed to be speaking to herself—“and oh the joy of being loved—the joy of it—of knowing it.”

“Aline!” he held her back and looked at her—at her face that had become beautiful to him, and into her eyes—at the light that shone in them. He was startled.

“Yes,” she whispered, and smiled at him.

"What does it mean?" He put his arms round her again; and then softly, with infinite tenderness: "Loved! You are loved. But what is your power over me? Where does it come from? I felt it even that first time when you turned your head away and I fled—because I was afraid."

But she only gave a long sigh of happiness. "I am so glad to be here—" she said. . . . He held her closer still.

XVIII.

THE summons came just a fortnight later. She had been expecting it, restless and uneasy, with a sense of getting ready for a journey—of wondering about the children—of gratitude that they were safe. . . . In another mood she found herself making promises into the space about her of all that she would do with them—that they should be brought up as he had said, to be lovers of the beautiful world, dreamers and idealists, and pure of heart and soul, if she could make them so. . . . A tender desperation concerning them grew upon her: she listened to the sound of their feet going upstairs when they came in from their walk—to the patter of them overhead as she lay awake in the morning—to the sound of their voices—it seemed like part of a farewell.

The telegram arrived late at night. *Dangerously wounded, would she come?* She went at once to Headquarters, and was given the permit—"For forty-eight hours or as much longer as the doctors deem advisable"—the period reminded her of his draft leave—but there was no train till seven the next morning from Charing Cross.

She spent a long night wandering over the house, stealing up to the nursery to look at the little sleeping faces—or into the drawing-room, going over the time when she had waited for him, and all that he had said. She stood for a minute before the place where the tall vases had been and thought of the sound he had put into the word Tuscany: it had conjured up a vision of days and places that he and Linda had seen together—

in the sunshine. . . . She thought, and smiled while she thought of them. . . .

In the dawn she started.

There were other women on the platform, sad and anxious-looking, bound on the same sort of errand. The messengers of the Red Cross met them and everything that was kind and helpful was done. All the time she felt as if she had no business there; this mood had taken hold of her on the way to the station: the wind that swept icily in upon her seemed to bring it, and to hurry her far ahead of all these sorrowing forms . . . and yet she stayed, an alien, utterly alone.

She huddled up in a corner of the railway carriage and shivered. Outside the light stole slowly over the morning fields. She drew her fur coat closer round her and closed her eyes; she was not very unhappy, and no tears came to her—passionate desolate tears of the sort she had shed the night he went, even though she had been comforted by the wonderful knowledge that he loved her. He did not seem to belong to her now, as he had then or in the days after he had started. He had sent her a tender last-word telegram before crossing and she had remembered his kisses, his arms about her, the reluctant leaving-go of them. She went over it all again in the train, but not with the blessed thankfulness of every day since, of even yesterday: to her now it seemed like a dream from which she was waking . . . and she thought of Linda's face, not sad and ill as she had seen it, but grave and happy—and satisfied.

The other women in the carriage looked at her as if they were going to speak, to ask her questions, but she closed her eyes again, and sleep overtook her: it seemed to claim her, as if the exhaustion that comes of parting had overtaken her. . . . She awoke and looked outwards. There were patches of wintry sunshine on the landscape, and the bare trees set her thinking of Battersea. She went back there in her thoughts, and over the days and the years that had been so curiously alike, they could not be disentangled: she had seldom remembered them of late.

At Folkestone the meaning of the many passes given

her was explained: and again it seemed like part of a proceeding to which she did not belong, and she avoided looking at the other women. She shrank back when she saw the boat, and went on board it feeling as if she had no right and would be prevented. It was almost a relief when she heard her name called by an official with a paper in his hand.

"Yes," she stood forward. He spoke in a gentle sympathetic voice while he told her that instructions had just come to say that she need not go on—it was too late.

Too late . . . yes, she had known.

She made no sign for a minute, then turned towards the gangway.

"I had better go back," she said. He had waited for this and followed her off the boat.

"There is a train in an hour's time," he told her, and saw that tea was brought her, and watched by her, thinking the news had stunned her, for they were very kind to those who went—and often went in vain. . . . She sat through the long hour looking out towards the sea, thinking that he had been on the other side when they sent the telegram yesterday, in a Field Hospital, perhaps—she didn't know—nothing more had been said. . . . When the Red Cross official came to take her to the train, seeing that she had somewhat recovered, he told her the battalion had distinguished itself and that "Alliston was splendid." She looked up at the word. Linda had known. . . . For all things are in the great sea of Time, and now one wave and now another, as it touches the shores, gives up its burden, for good or ill, or whispers its secret, and goes back to come again—who shall know when or how? . . . And he and Linda had given her their children—their cottage was hers—and they had gone—it had all been set right—they had gone on together—she smiled and thought how beautiful Linda was, and loved her. "Dearest," she said in her thoughts, "how wonderful you were to me. I shall never stand behind the barriers again: you took me a little way on with you and let me see and hear. You gave me life—you have made everything different."

All the way back she thought of her, and then again of Battersea. She had been so confused that day she went there with Jimmy, like a stranger; and not even able to remember the name of the young couple who had the flat. She remembered it now, it was Foale, of course—Vi and Bert they had called each other. She went through the rooms and imagined the changes they had made, and wondered if the flowers they had put on the balcony were dead or brought in and sheltered for the summer to come. How strange it was never to have entered the Park; but the gates of the world—though she had looked through them as she had looked through the Italian gates at Beechwood—had been closed on her then: now they were open. Some day she would go to Battersea and take the children. No—she never would: it should remain for ever a mystery to her. But it was wonderful how well she could see it as she sat there in the train—across the way—the distances—the people coming and going. She thought of the band hidden behind the trees, and the boats on the unseen lake. They were not there now, but in the spring they would be there again: she never used to think about the spring, but she loved it now, longed for it. Her eyes were wide open to the beauty of the world.

She got back to Bedford Square in the afternoon. Stimson let her in: she smiled at him, so that he did not understand why she had returned so soon. Mr. Gilston was there, he told her. He was in a London hospital now, this was the first time he had been allowed out and he had come to see her; but he looked tired, Stimson added, so he had persuaded him to come in and rest—he had told him about the telegram from France.

She went to him in the morning-room. He was in blue; one eye was covered; and his arm was in a splint and sling.

"How good of you to come," she said. "Are you getting better?"

She seemed a little confused as if she were trying to remember how she addressed him. There flashed through him a remembrance of the night he had met her first at the Bendish dinner-party.

"I expect Dick was right, she is a blend," he thought. "It is very curious."

She sat down and seemed reluctant to speak, but he knew; he had known the moment she entered. "He has gone," she said at last.

"Poor chap!" he nearly broke down.

"They have gone on together." For a moment her face lighted up. "I think it was this morning—" she remembered the shivering train journey and her loneliness; she felt as if she had been wandering between thought and reality, and the dividing line was hidden from her.

"He'll be so eager, he'll scour the universe and know the inside of every star before we have started," Jimmy tried to make his voice philosophical.

"I feel as if I had been to speed them on their way. They must be so happy—I can see them"—her eyes were the eyes of a visionary.

He stared at her blankly. Poor dear, he thought, she was overwrought and full of fancies. The best way was to humour her. "I dare say," he said.

"We ought to be glad for them," the momentary exaltation vanished; she looked very tired.

"The worst of it is we are so beastly human, it sometimes handicaps our finest notions," he answered and they were silent for a minute. "I think I should like to see the poor little kids if you will let me—unless I am too much of a scarecrow in these?"—he meant his bandages.

"Oh no, and *they* would like you to see them." They went up, just as she and Dick had gone—those journeys up the wide shallow stairs were like milestones in her life. They stopped a little way off. Janet was singing. "Oh, what is it—I know it quite well," she asked him.

"It's a Scotch song of some sort." Jimmy never knew one tune from another.

"Of course—I have heard her sing it before," she answered confusedly, "but I can't think when——"

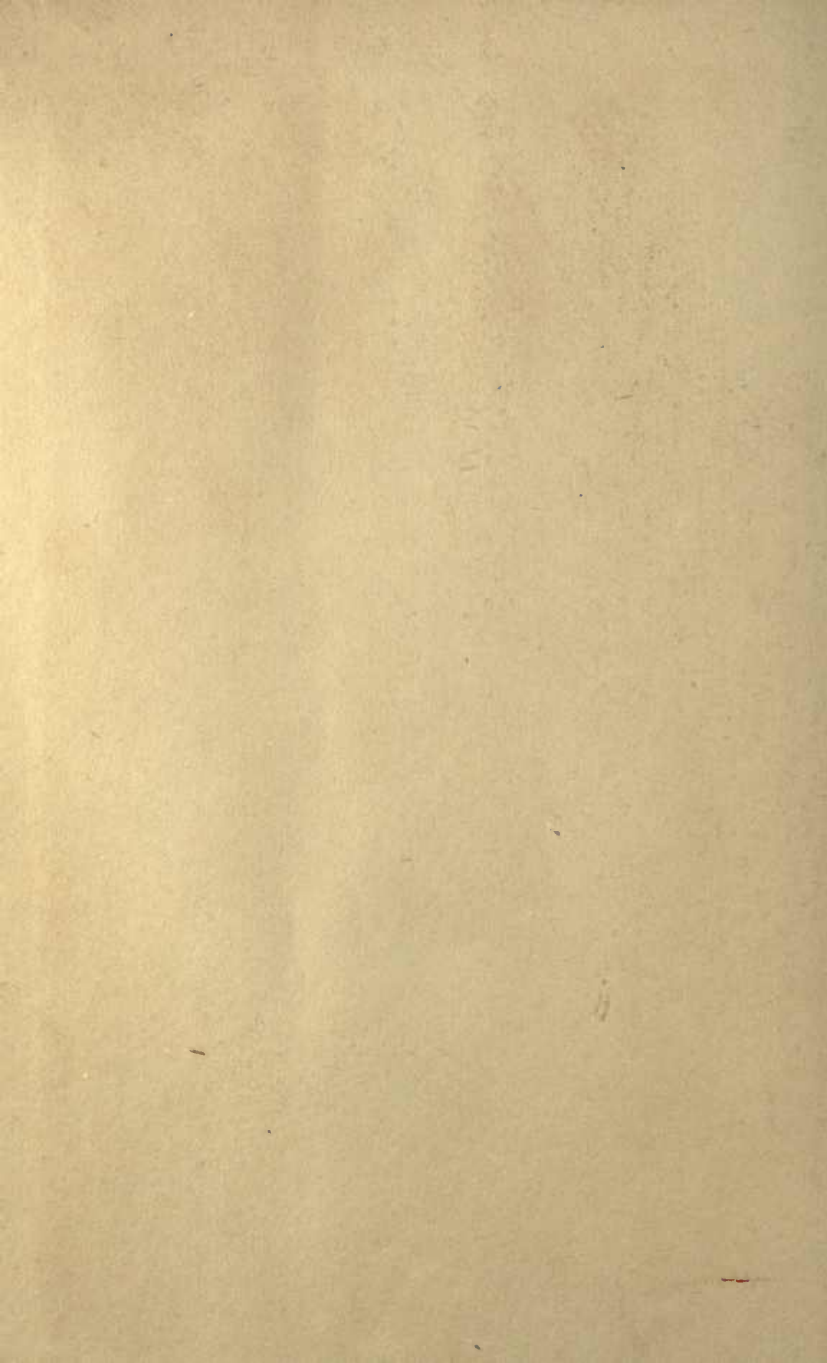
She opened the nursery door. "My darlings," she said.

The children ran towards her with little shouts of joy

crying "Allee—Allee!" She knelt and closed her arms tightly round them. "You are mine—they gave you to me—you are mine," she whispered.

"They will love you so," she heard Janet say. "That's what she said at the last." Was it the message?

Jimmy, standing by, gave a little sympathetic grunt. She looked up at him: in her heart there was content.



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